

Michael Bishop

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Michael Bishop

I'm a cross-cut saw, won't you drag me 'cross your log.

—Traditional blues song attributed to Sam Chapman.

In the months it has taken to prepare this book and the exhibition it accompanies, Michael Bishop has made several trips to Chicago from his current home in Rochester, New York. On those visits, one of his favorite after-work entertainments has been a late night tour of some of the blues clubs for which the city is famous. On a recent such Southside foray, the thought came to me that Bishop's work bears comparison with Chicago's only indigenous form of musical expression (and with the bluegrass, swing, country-and-western, "rockabilly," and other kinds of vernacular music that make up the largest part of Bishop's personal record library). That correspondence goes beyond the balls-y, macho aggressiveness Bishop's work shares with that of, say, a Buddy Guy or a Jimmy Rogers. It goes beyond their shared straightforwardness and seeming simplicity of form (aren't blues music and lyrics as "symmetrical" as many of Bishop's pictures?), and even further than the similar use of irony, wit, and double-entendre.

Blues music is often—and falsely—read as a reliance on form at the expense of content. The music commonly uses familiar motifs, and the audience predictably (and, some would say, intuitively) responds with the tapping fingers, swaying bodies, moving feet that none but the most jaded listeners can seem to suppress. The blues audience knows the formula, usually well enough to be surprised and charmed when the musician introduces some unexpected variation on it. Indeed, one measure of a skillful performer is in his ability to mix the already-accepted with the unique.

But the accomplished songwriter knows that to get people dancing with their bodies is to open their minds in a way that would be difficult to do by any other

method. Blues lyrics—at once unobtrusive yet forceful—range from radical political and social commentary, to poetry about the most basic human desires and deepest human emotions; they are almost never gratuitous. More important, the blues musician relates the music to the lyrics so as to further explicate the meaning of the piece as a whole.

I think that a lot of Michael Bishop's photographs work in much the same way, relying on style as an entry into, and a component of, the total statement. Though we might think of him as a "formalist," consider his pictures in relation to the non-objective painting of the last twenty-odd years, to which they bear at least a superficial resemblance: "they remain," as Andy Grundberg has pointed out in *Art in America* (July-August 1977), "resolutely and insistently photographic." This isn't only because they have, as virtually all lens-imaged photographs do, a "subject," but because that aspect is important to the meaning of the final picture, as Bishop indicates by his consistency in choice and treatment of the subject.

This is most apparent in the large monochromatic images he produced between 1972 and 1975 (Bishop calls them the *Tones*, as opposed to the *Chromes* done from 1974 to the present). During that time, the pictures he made were tightly cropped, strictly organized glimpses of some of the physical structures we, as a society, create, and the tools we used to make them. It's significant that Bishop chooses to photograph objects that we have made to control—quite literally—ourselves, each other, and the forces of nature. Fences, guard rails, safety horses, traffic control devices, street signs, aqueducts, sidewalks, and walls appear again and again, and the appearance of "flatness" that Bishop introduces (and which help earn him the label of formalist) heightens the impression of impregnability and strict limitation of our ability to "enter" the picture.

The tools and machines that appear in Bishop's pictures also suggest this idea of physical control, for what we are shown is not the sleek, modern exterior of a computer or some other product of our electronic technology—which for many would inspire awe of a magic they don't quite understand—but the guts of an engine or the blade of a plow—symbols of raw physical power which an individual man or woman could never counter. The fact that most of the objects that appear in Bishop's pictures are the kind of utilitarian products that are manufactured and put to use as stripped-down skeletons which reveal their own structure (it's apparent that they have been *constructed*, with each bolt and rivet bared), suggests that a human consciousness wields, or at least has instilled, that power—a far more disconcerting idea than that of the beneficent super-brain we might think of as residing somewhere at the center of a computer.

Words as they appear on street signs, billboards, and such appear often in Bishop's *Tones* pictures. Poets long ago realized the special power of the single word or phrase, torn from its original context (or shielded from a potential one), and allowed to dart freely from connotation to connotation, mind to mind. Most of Bishop's words are negative commands (he'd have us think it's because they happen to get in the way of his camera, and those, after all, are the words likely to show up in pictures made on the street): Do Not; No Ballplaying Allowed; Do Not Enter; One Way. Arrows point us in one direction, then another, then three ways at once.

The pictures themselves, with their graphic blatentness and intensity, often read like orders: Stop. Look At This. It's here, it's beautiful in some way, frightening certainly. Even in the more recent color work, many of the same subjects and concerns are carried forward, though in a less didactic, perhaps more playfully

inquisitive way. But it all seems to be part of the same effort he defined for me recently when he told me, "I'm just trying to make some sense out of that mess out there."

THIS PUBLICATION SURVEYS only the last seven years of Michael Bishop's photography. Though he was born in just 1946 (September 26, Palo Alto, CA), this period represents less than half of a nearly incredible career in terms of its richness of ideas, and even in terms of the sheer volume of work produced. Given that he learned photography in sixth grade, held his first professional job (printing color for a commercial photographer) in junior high school, and by high school was working steadily in photography (in a job for an industrial photographer), it is not surprising that work he produced as an undergraduate at San Francisco State College already contained the germ of ideas still current for him today.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is Bishop's interest in the space in front of the camera—how it is translated in the photograph, and our interpretation of that translation. One group of student photographs, made shortly before he received an MA degree from San Francisco State in 1971, consisted of double prints made "in-camera" by masking first one half, then the other, of the lens. By pointing the camera at different angles for each of the two exposures, he was able to create the kind of spatial ambiguities so disconcerting in the single images he makes now.

During 1971-72 Bishop concentrated on a group of pictures he calls the *Space/Technology Series*. The series began as pictures of deserted, "moonscape"-like areas (such as the Bonneville Salt Flats) to which he added multiple cross-hairs to suggest the scientific photographs often collected by satellites and astronauts. It eventually

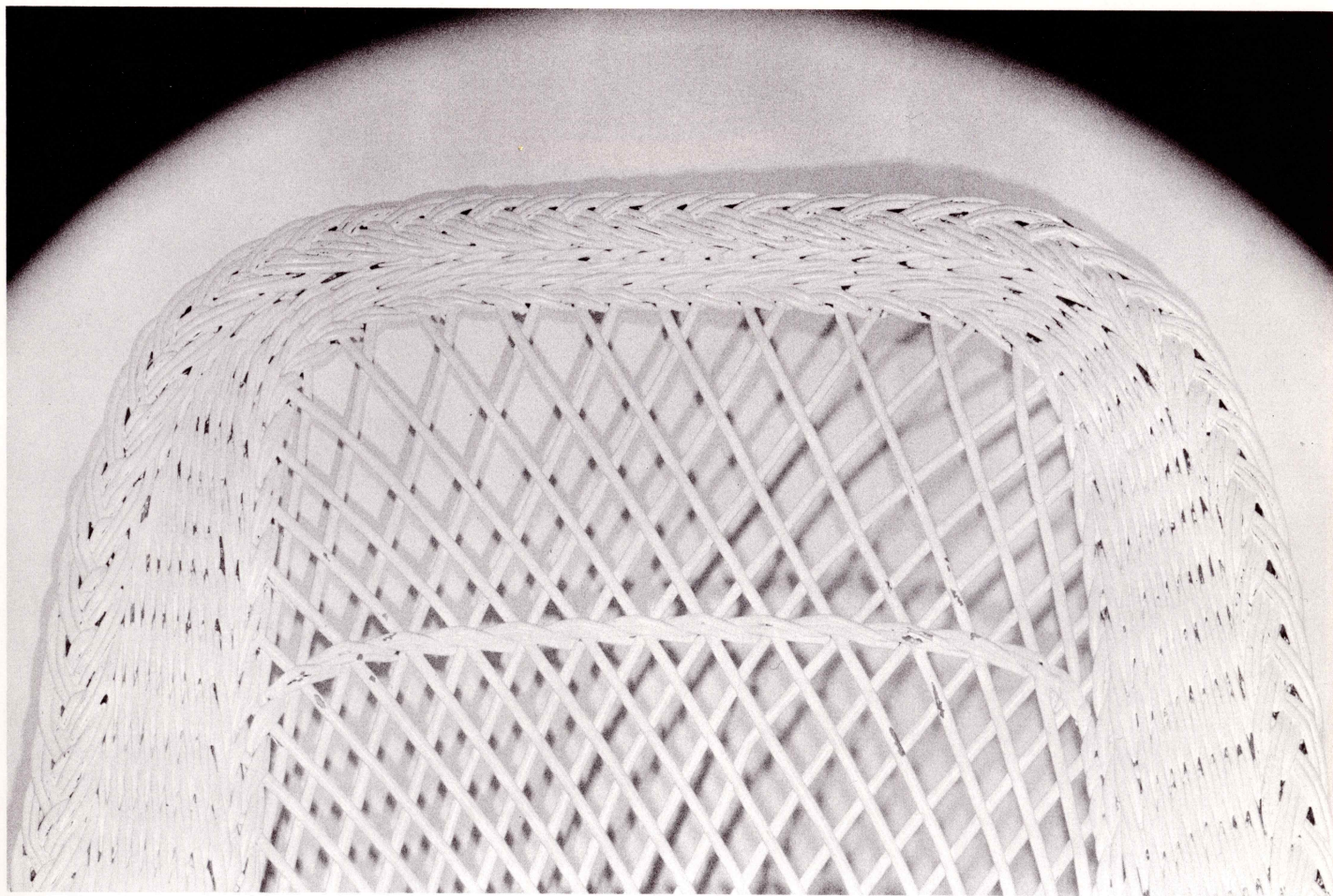
expanded to include hundreds of pseudoscientific documents, made by a variety of techniques (some of my favorites incorporated photograms of plastic model parts of spacemen and their weapons and tools).

Bishop sees the *Space/Technology* pictures as something of a diversion (though a fruitful one of which he is quite proud) from the main course of his work. Indeed, Charles Hagen's point that the *Tones* and *Chromes* are largely an examination of visual perception (and the camera's role in shaping it) indicates how useful that mode can be in discussing these pictures. But look, too, at the subject both denoted and implied by the *Space/Technology* photographs: certainly they are about our place in a highly technological society, and the alienation which such a society seems to breed. Thus, the series can be seen to be clear and logical introduction to the work which forms this book.

Michael Bishop has been awarded two fellowships by the National Endowment for the Arts (1975, 1978), and a Creative Artists Public Service grant (New York State Council on the Arts, 1977). His work is in numerous private and university collections, and in the permanent collections of the following museums: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House (Rochester, NY), Musee d'Arles (France), Museum of Fine Arts (St. Petersburg, FL), Museum of Modern Art (New York), National Museum of Canada (Ottawa), and the Oakland Museum (California).

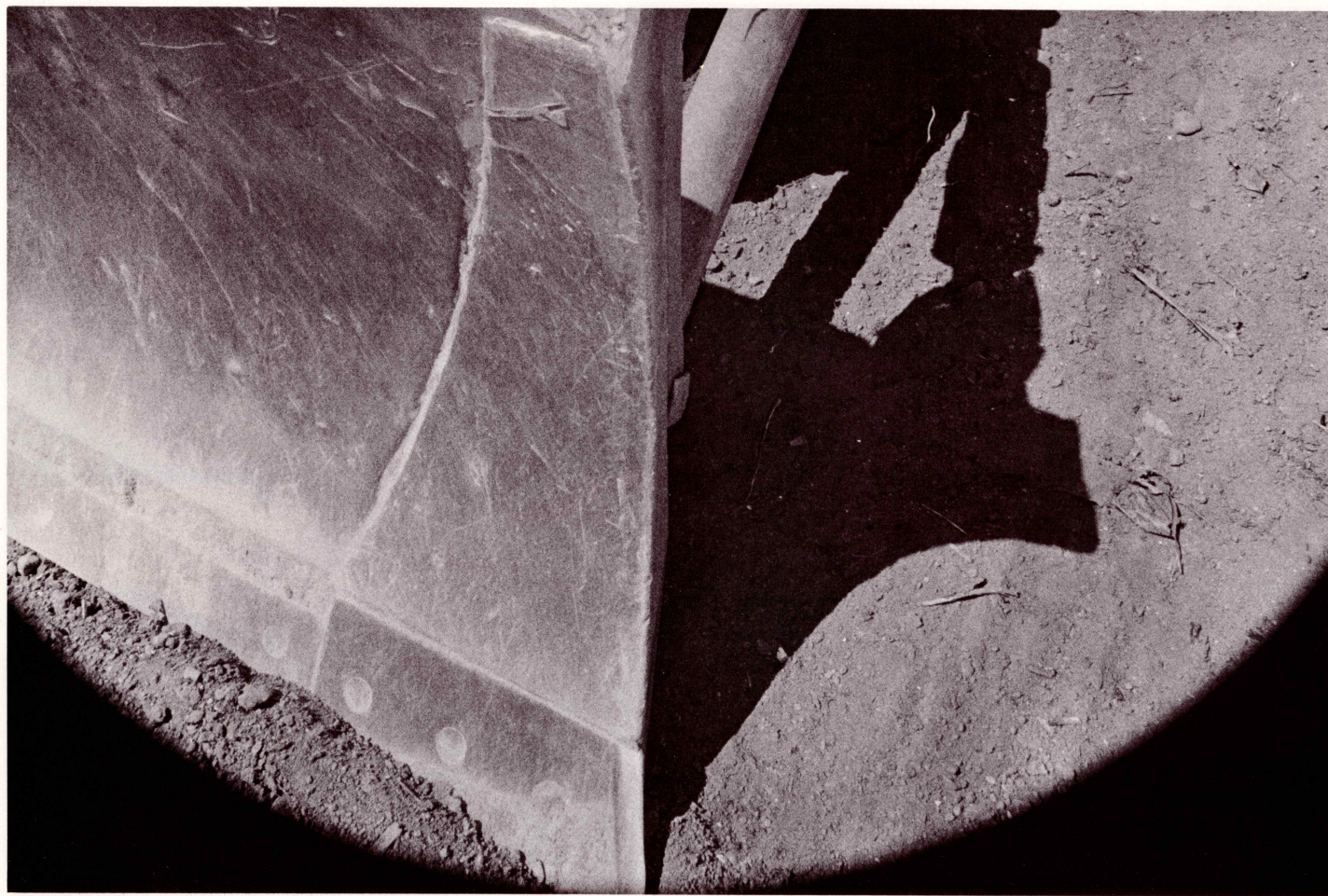
Charles Desmarais
Director

Tones





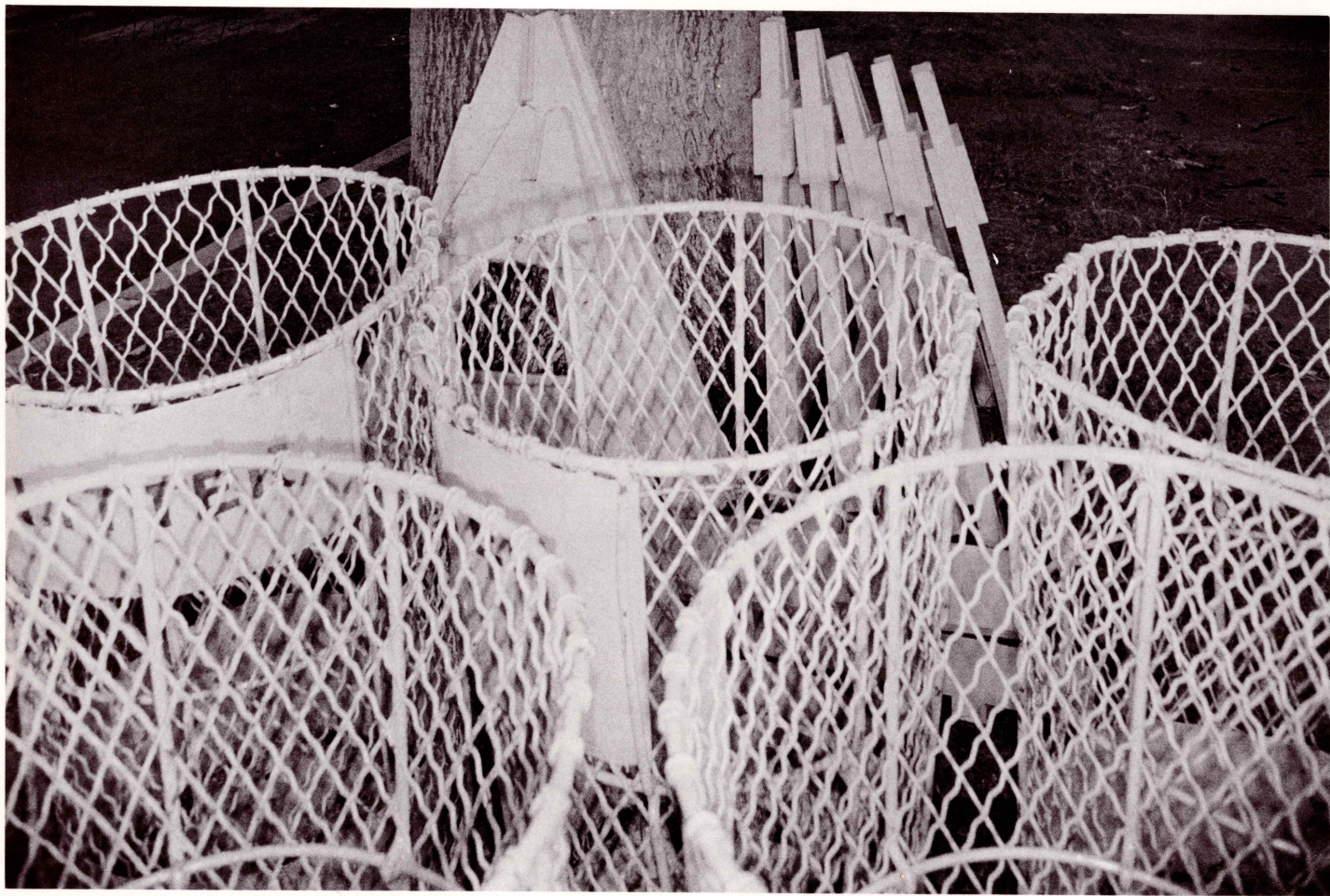






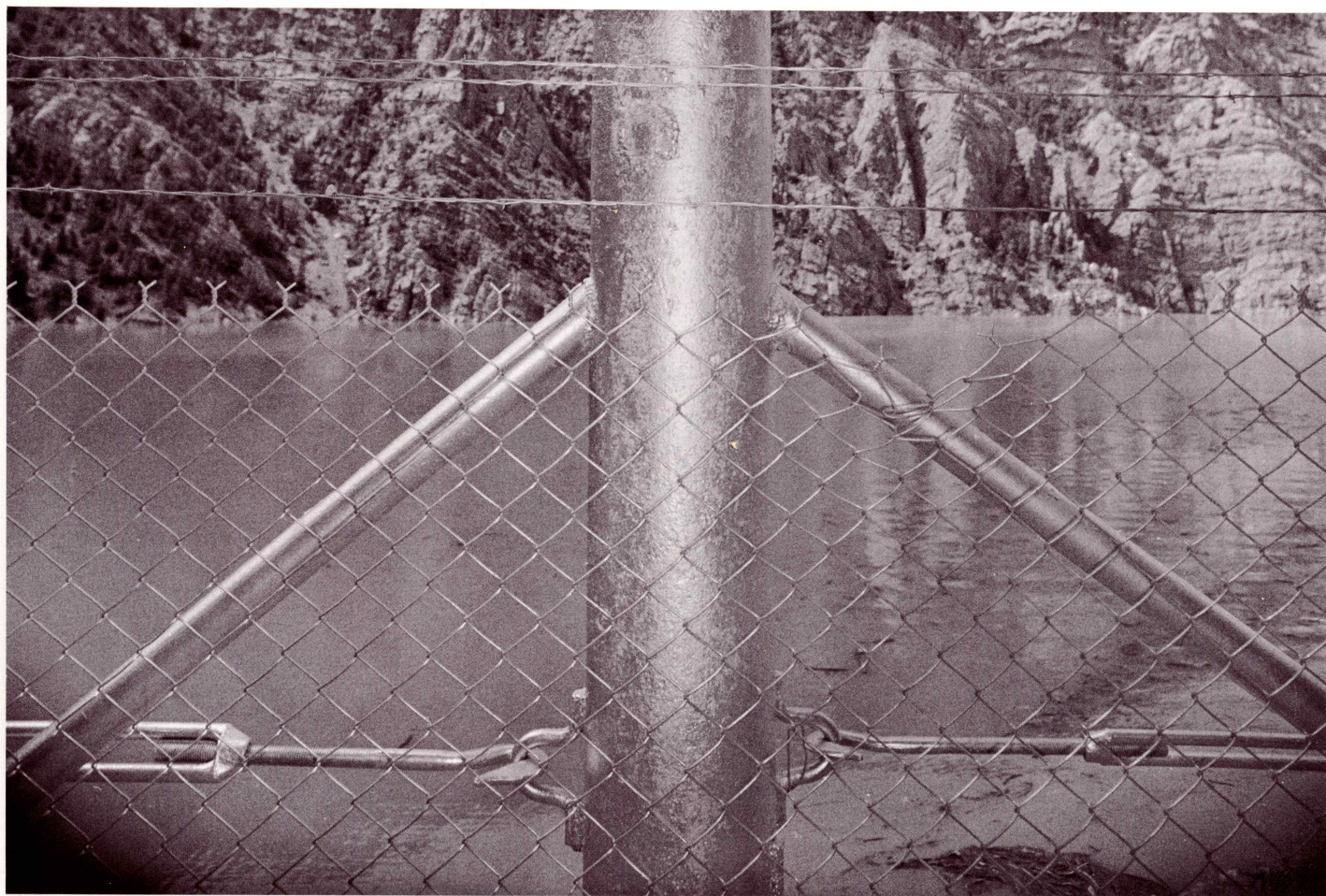


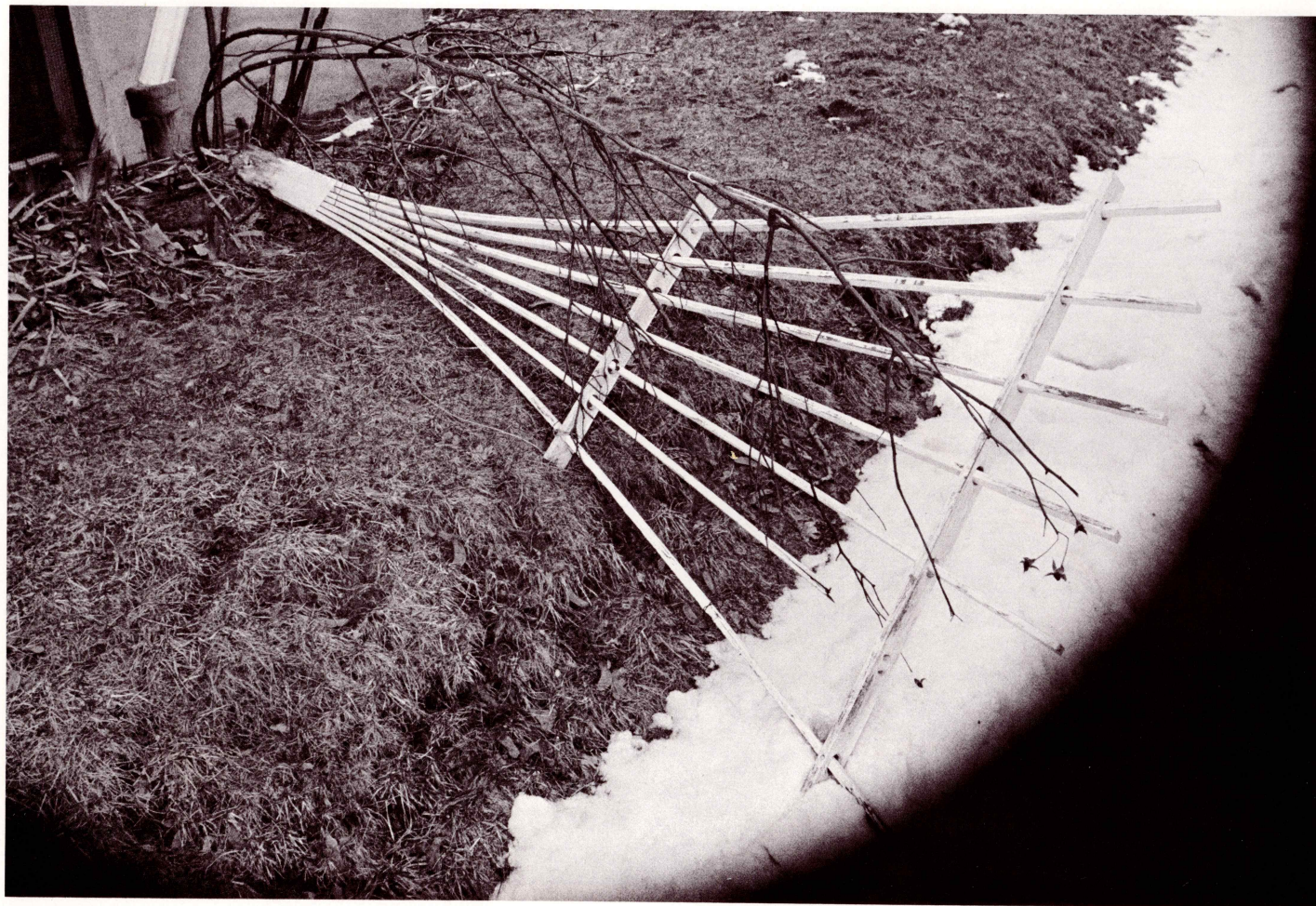


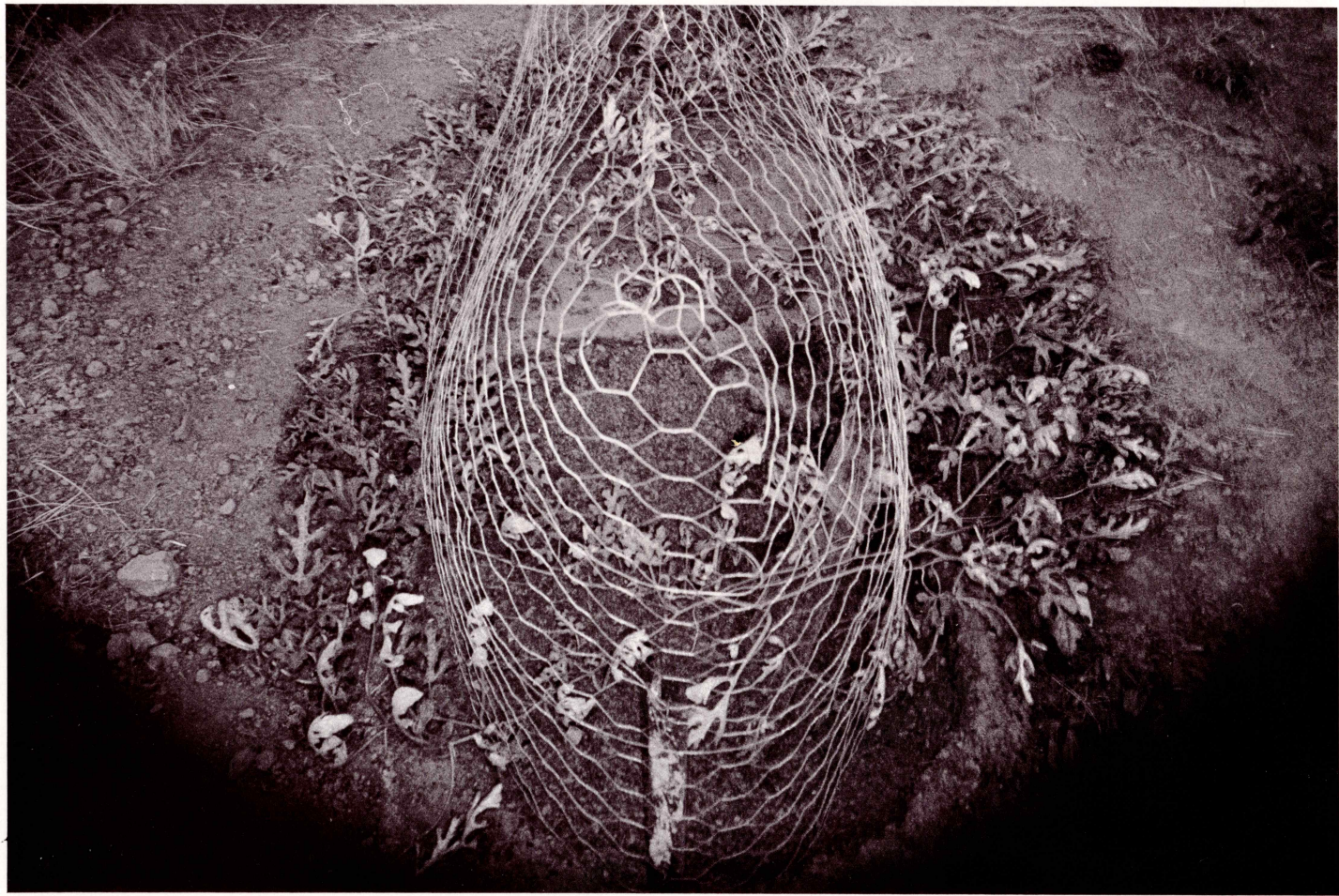


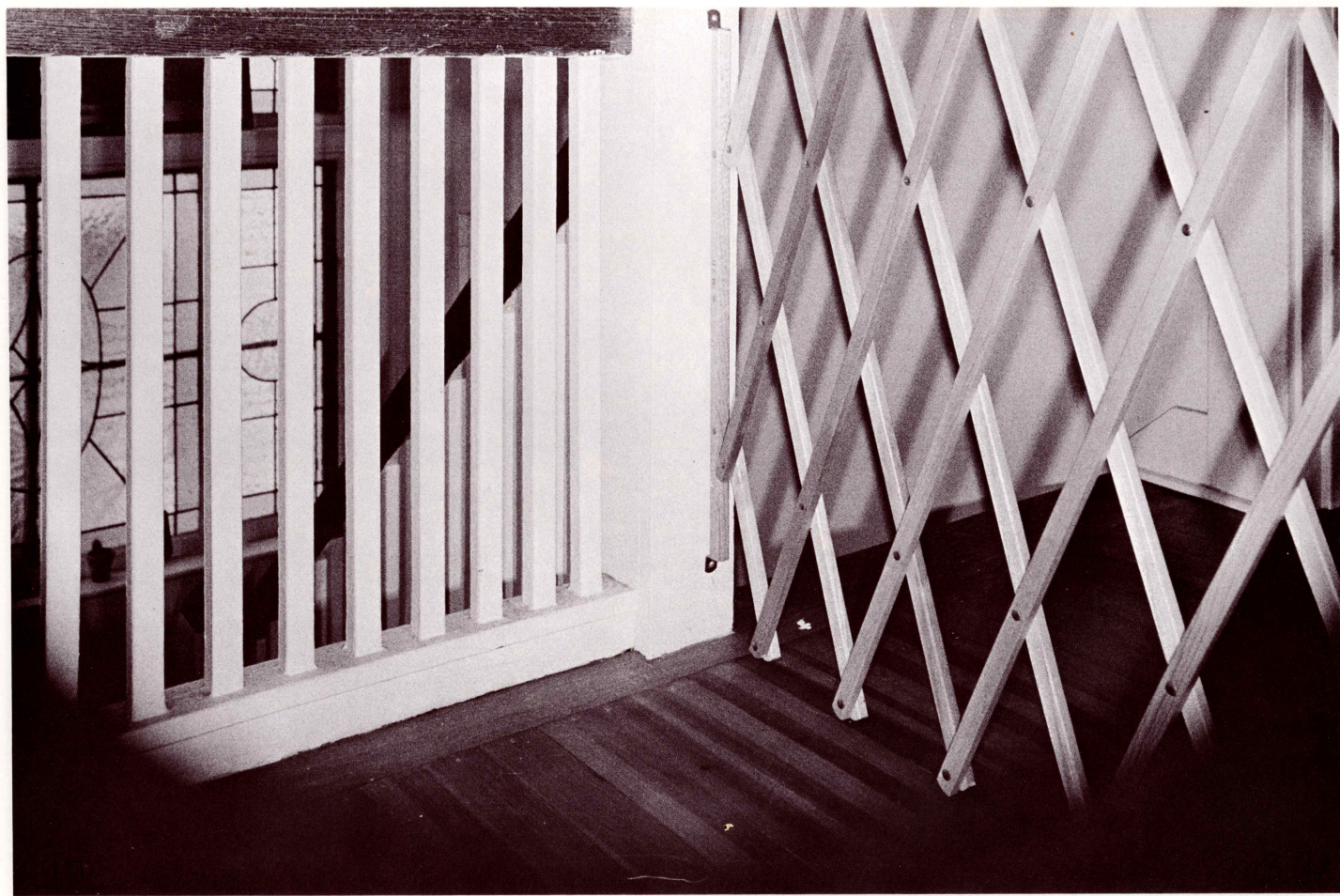


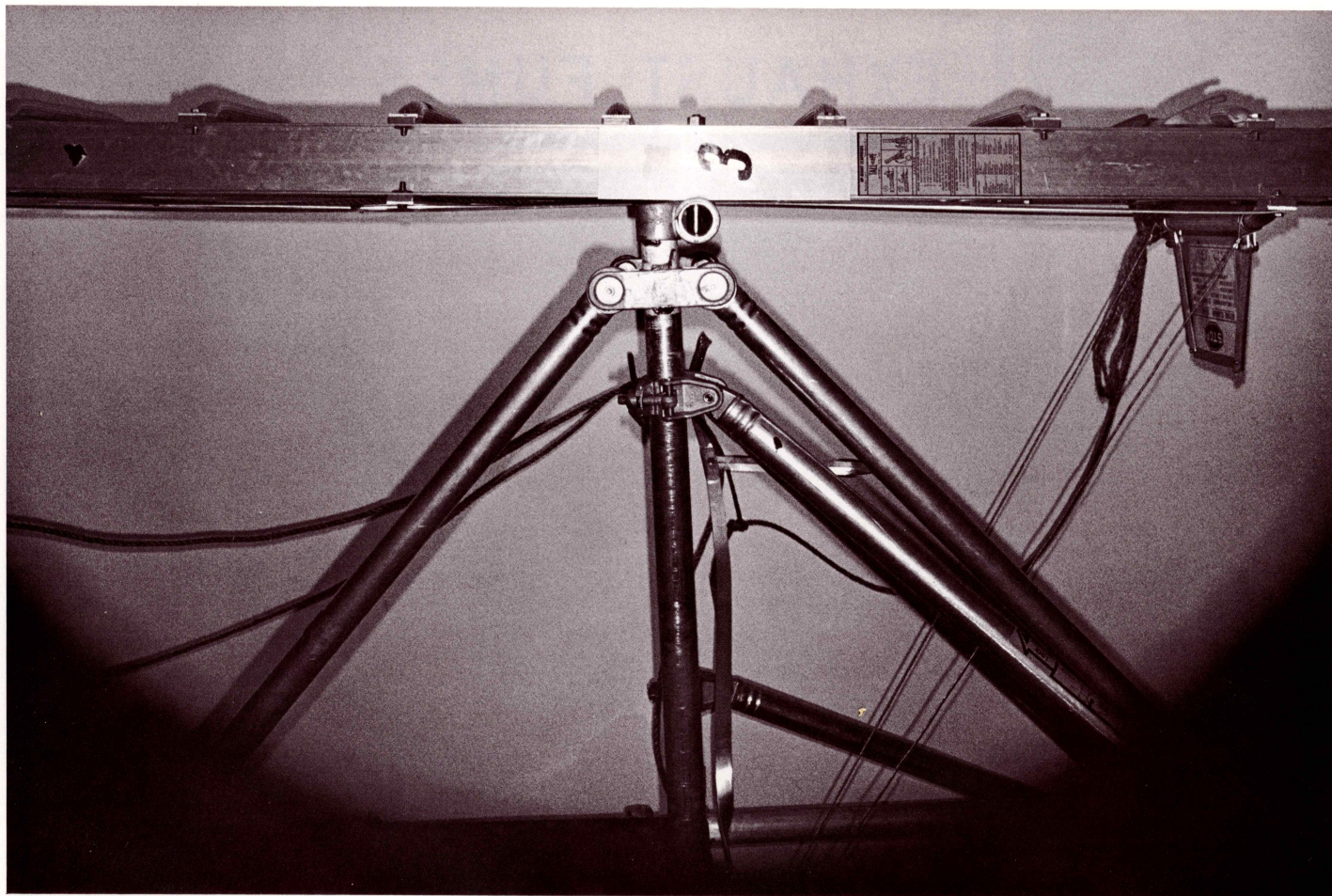










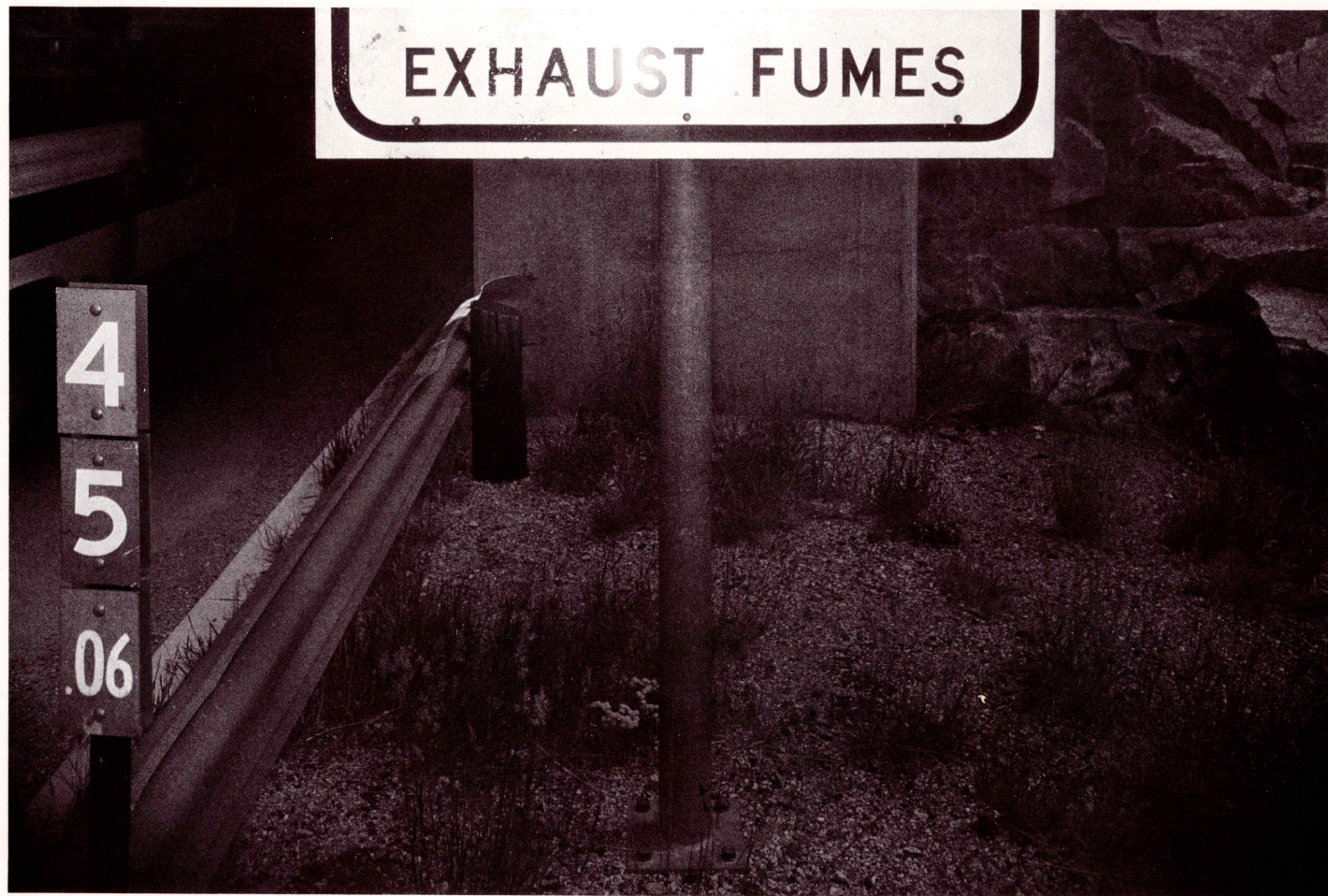


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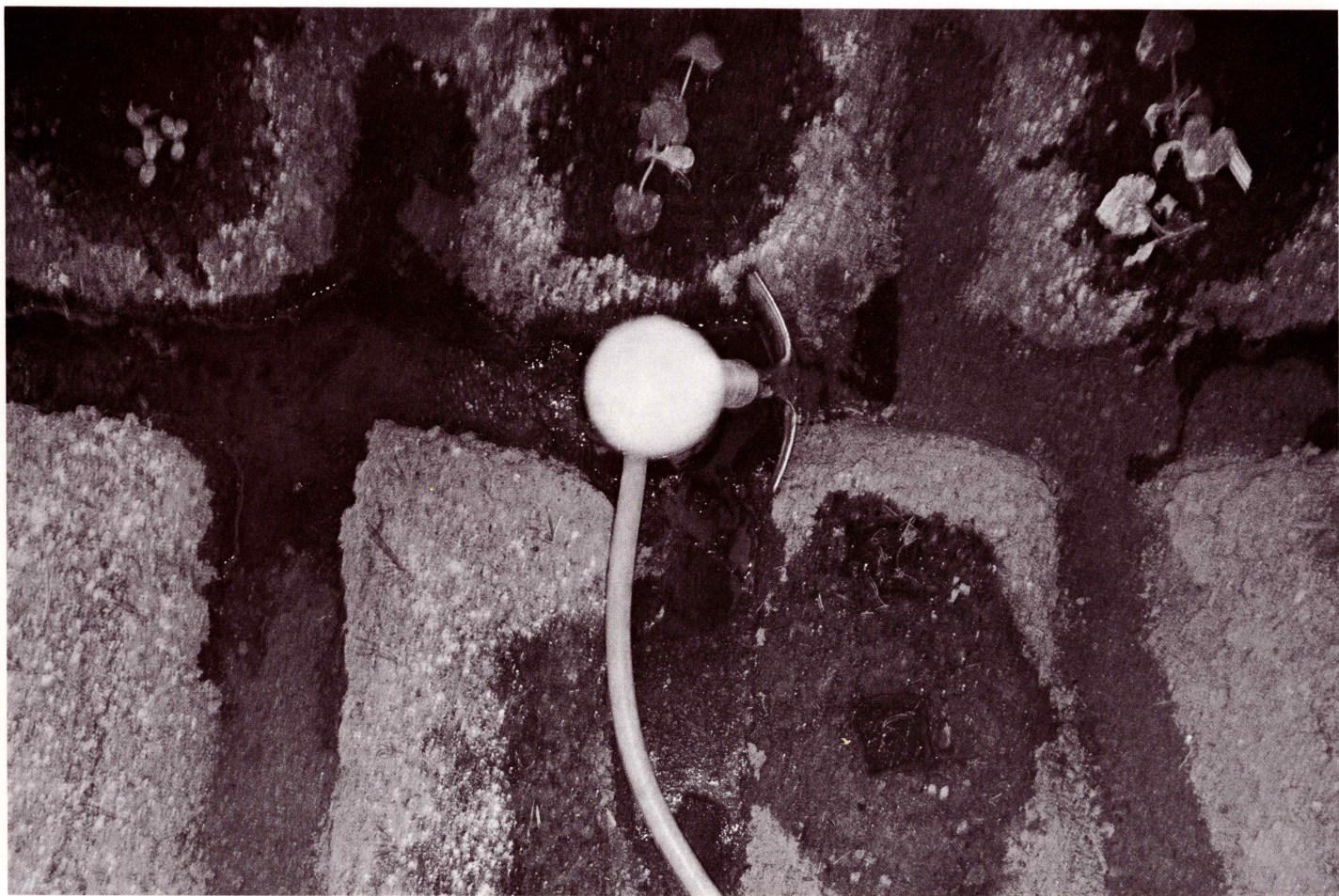
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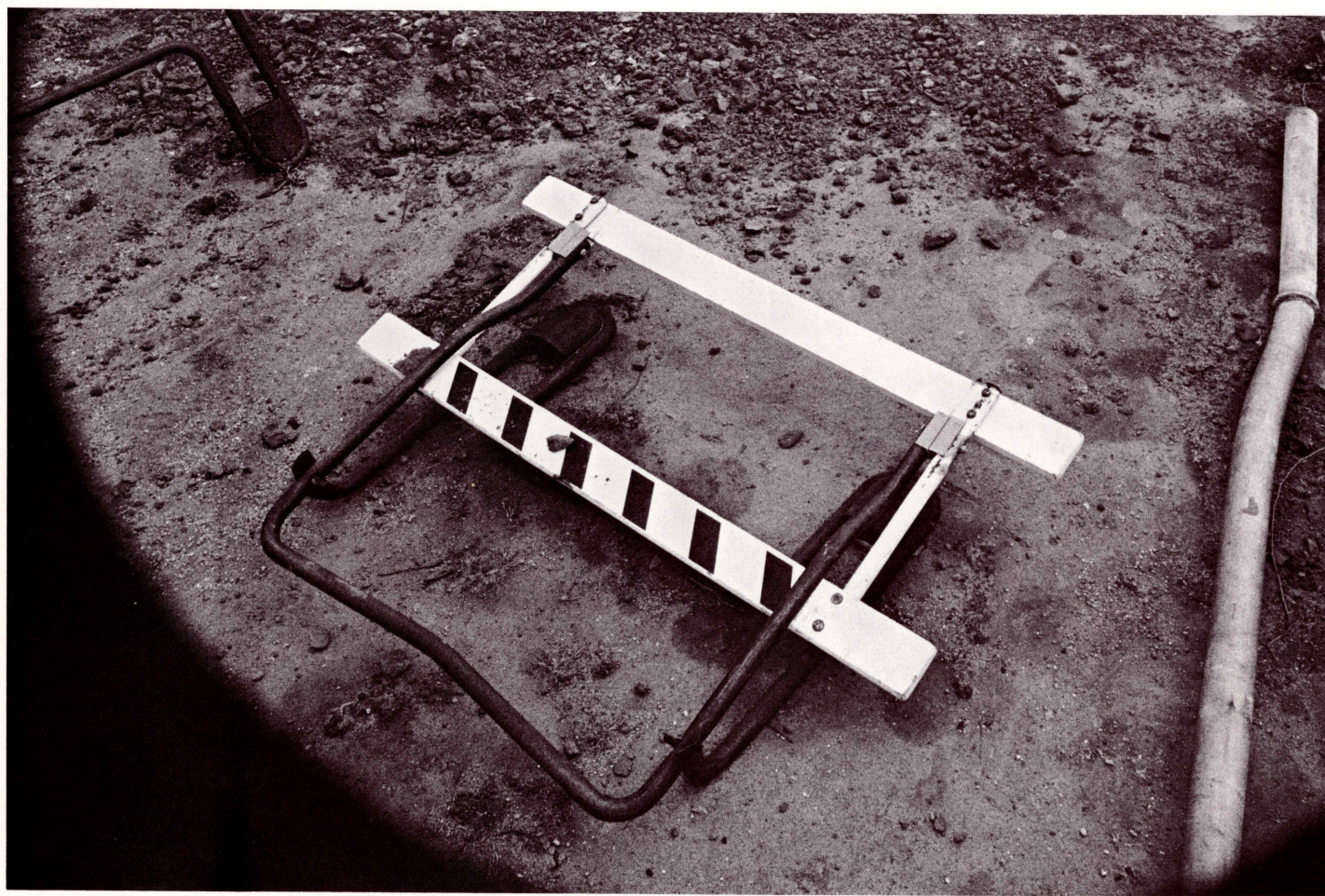
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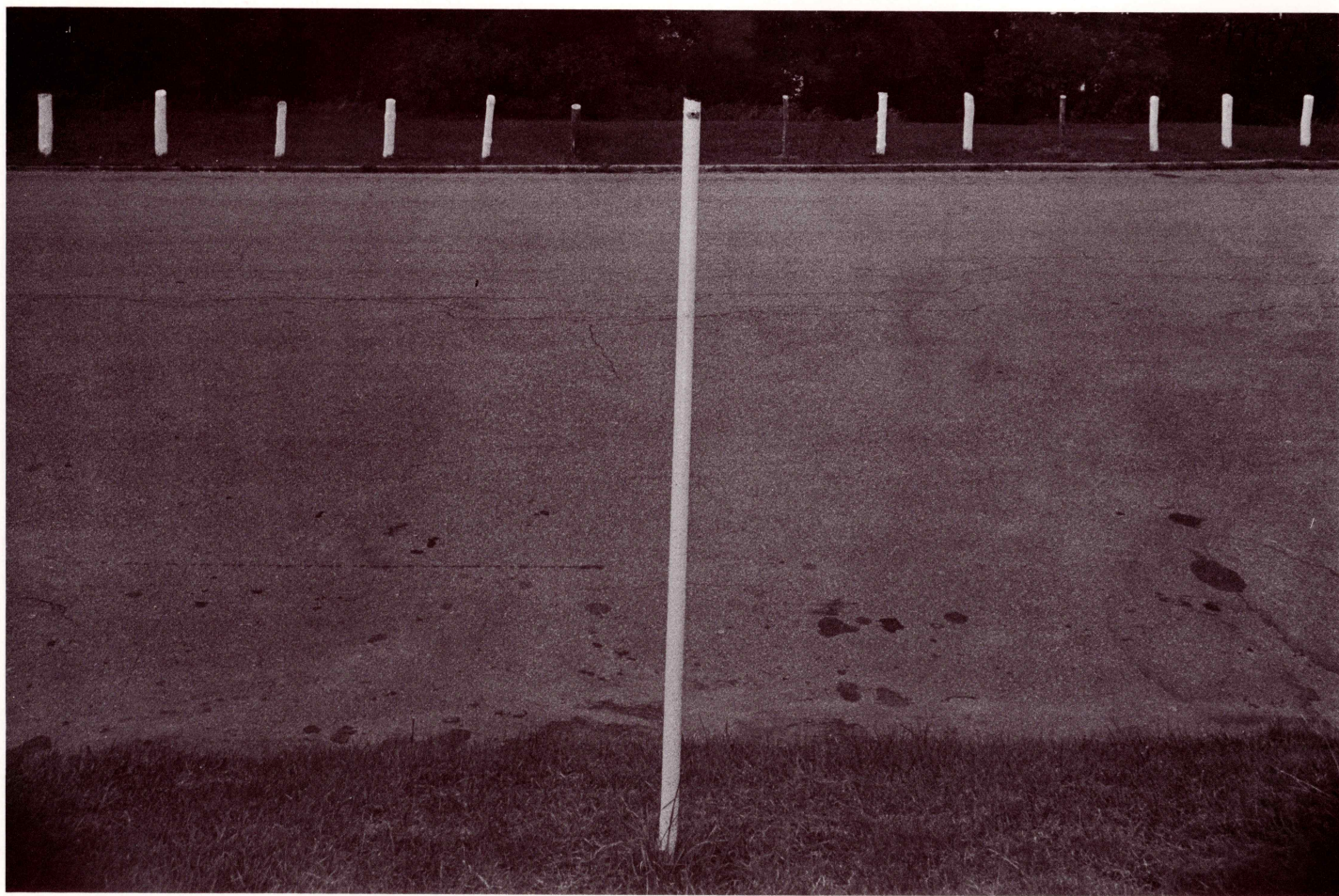




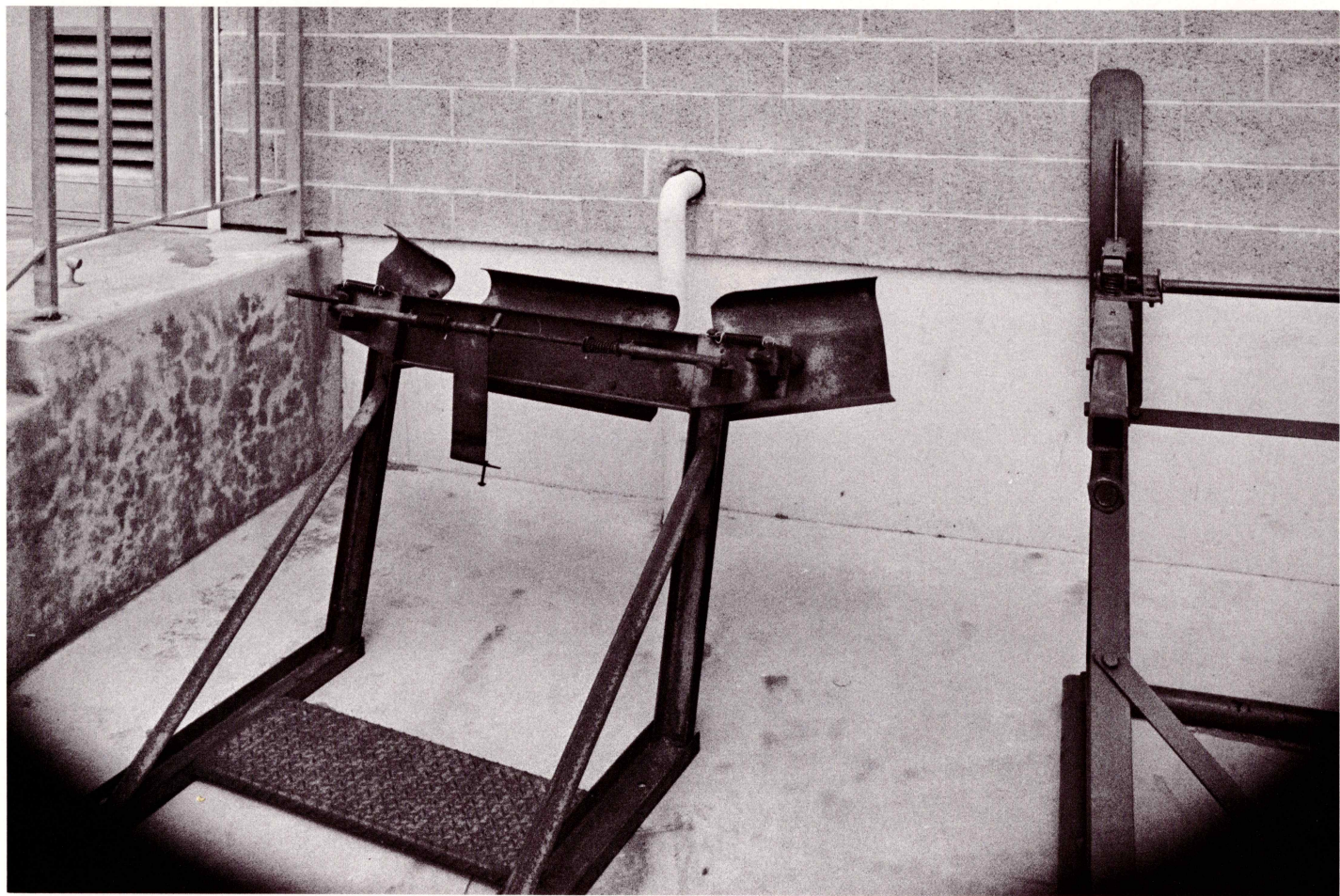












In all of his work from the past decade Michael Bishop has played witty games with the mechanics of the illusion of photography. Bishop's wit is ironic and understated: by finding objects which, in a photograph, will echo formal aspects of the photograph, he points out the ways in which the illusions of the medium are produced. By doing so, he leads us to question our own unconscious assumptions about the nature of photography, and of perception. "Philosophical toys"—the phrase used in the nineteenth century to refer to the optical toys which prefigured motion pictures—is an apt term for Bishop's photographs as well.

Bishop's pictures never allow us to take the photographic process by which they were made for granted. Instead, almost all of them provide us with the intellectual pleasure—or frustration—of trying to unravel the paradoxes they present.

These paradoxes do not depend on our interpretation of the objects in the photographs, but rather on their formal properties. In themselves, the scenes in Bishop's photographs are not particularly unusual; for the most part Bishop photographs banal, undistinguished urban and suburban scenes of the kind we've grown used to in the work of street photographers in the last twenty years.

Within these scenes, though, certain kinds of objects recur frequently. Most things in Bishop's photographs are simple in structure, and often brightly colored. An astonishing number of the objects Bishop photographs are signs, or serve basically a signifying role in the world: they are meant to be seen, quickly and clearly, and, since they have no other function, their physical form is often minimal. Thus, in his color photographs, and in his earlier series of toned black and white prints

as well, Bishop has used (in most cases, repeatedly) road signs, traffic signs, highway stripes, painted curbs, billboards, construction barriers, road dividers, and fences of all sorts. These objects—all appearance, and bursting with unspecified significance—provide the raw material for Bishop's work.

When we look at one of Bishop's pictures we are able, without a great deal of difficulty, to reconstruct in our imaginations a replica of the space and the objects which were in front of the camera. But as we examine the photograph more closely, and allow ourselves to enter into the implied space of the scene, we begin to notice laughable formal congruities, and bizarre ruptures of the picture space. Like Duchampian tongue twisters, the formal order in these pictures has taken charge, and composition runs rampant. Objects close to the camera and far away from it line up with absurd precision; a pole which appears to be straight casts a curved shadow (and vice versa). Everything in a photograph may be a different shade of the same color—or of its complement. The form of one object in the picture will echo the form of another, different, object, and of another, and another. Most often these punning echoes increase the ambiguity of one or more of the illusions of the photograph—whether that of perspective, the frame, texture, grain, or color. Often objects in a picture will mimic the clues which we interpret to create the illusion of space which perspective provides. For example, two slanting lines might appear next to each other in a photograph; as if in a Magritte painting, one may indicate a line painted on the ground, receding in the distance, while the other might be a line painted at an angle on a sign parallel to the picture plane. Quizzical ambiguities of this sort appear in all of Bishop's work.

At the same time, though, there's nothing in the pictures

that we can point to as the cause of these effects. No exotic technical processes appear to have been used to make the pictures; although their flat expanses of color make them look a little like cut-paper collages, the pictures are clearly photographs. Since the scenes are so resolutely open and clear, we're forced to the conclusion that their ambiguity is the result of the process itself. To make the illusionistic systems of photography reveal themselves, Bishop applies them to tasks which they are supposed to be able to accomplish; this, however, produces results so unlikely that we have to question the photographs as depictions of the world we experience every day.

To achieve these effects Bishop uses a 35mm camera and a perspective-control (PC) lens. This lens, usually used in architectural photography to keep the sides of a building from seeming to converge as they recede from the photographer, has a front element which can be moved off the axis of the lens, approximating some of the movements of the lens board of a view camera. Bishop uses this lens to alter the apparent perspective in the scenes he photographs. By moving the front element of the lens in one direction or another, he can make objects appear to overlap, or to line up with one another, or to run parallel to the edge of the frame.

However much we've come to distrust the allures and illusions of photography, most of us still believe, to a greater or lesser degree, in the idea of "straight" photography. Inherent in this notion is the assumption that the world exists outside and independent of us, and that photography has some special relation to that world—that it can, perhaps, provide us with an accurate, value-free depiction of that world. We tend to treat photography as if it were a part of nature, a part of the world which we use it to record, and not a

product of ourselves. As Susan Sontag notes in *On Photography*, "What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are hand made visual statements, like painting and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire." It is this assumption about the relation between photography and reality which gives the sort of reflexive investigation of photographic form which Bishop and others have been pursuing an added level of meaning, a level which similar efforts in painting, say, or literature, do not have. A challenge to the authority of photography is a challenge to the culture's communal reality.

The authority of photography rests on the authority of the technology embodied in the two main elements of the photographic system—the lens, which is designed to produce a perspectival illusion of space in the pictures, and the emulsion, which produces minutely differentiated tones and details. This technology, in turn, is built upon the regularity of science and mathematics. In believing that a photograph is more than just a picture of something, but has some special relationship to that thing, we make another assumption: that the regularities of mathematics and science provide an objective reflection of reality. But this assumption is by no means unchallenged. Increasingly, historians and philosophers of science are pointing out the ideological nature of much supposedly objective science, and the source of many scientific advances in intuition. For example, in *Against Method* (London: Verso Books, 1975), the British philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend argues that "science is much closer to myth than a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the many forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best. It is conspicuous,

noisy, and impudent, but it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favour of a certain ideology, or who have accepted it without ever having examined its advantages and its limits." The assumptions on which we base our somewhat mystical belief in photography's special relationship with reality are thus themselves questionable.

What photography does provide us with, though, is a standardized system of representation which, however inaccurate it may be, however far its products may be from our perception of the world (not to mention our experience of it), is above all consistent. Photography is a social medium: it provides a code which, because it has been standardized and embodied in a technological system, can be used as anyone. But, as with a language, its particular characteristics determine what can be expressed through it. An interesting observation about Bishop's photographs is that nearly all of them include man-made objects. In fact, when we think about this, we realize that it is essential that this be the case, if we are to recognize the references the pictures make to the way space is depicted using perspective. We need to know that a line or form is regular and predictable (as man-made objects almost always are) if we are to be able to see how it is changed by being translated by perspective, and to become aware of the internal references to perspective that the picture makes. In most cases we would be unable to make such determinations if all the objects in Bishop's photographs were natural objects.

This connection between man-made objects and Bishop's project of underlining the regularity of photographic illusions suggests that all man-made things, are, more or less, derived from the idealizations of mathematics. In making something we extrapolate from a natural phenomenon those features which serve the need we are

attempting to fill; we then re-embodiment those features, in an abstracted form, in the new object. In regaining for photography the status of a made thing, Bishop's work also speaks about this process of making.

Bishop is certainly not the first photographer to investigate the implications of photographic form. In fact, Bishop has a broad awareness of the history of the medium, and acknowledges the influence of the work of Frederick Sommer on his own work. The Constructivist photographers of the 1920s and '30s, such as Alexander Rodchenko and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, explicitly treated the photographic process as a system which could be used to produce new kinds of pictures (suggesting new images of reality) by changing any of the steps in it. As spread by the graduates of the photography program at Chicago's Institute of Design, that realization has provided a working method for many contemporary photographers. Bishop's photographs share the engineered quality that marks much of the work of the Constructivists, but where these earlier photographers would rely heavily on unusual points of view to emphasize the graphic, geometric properties of a scene, Bishop will achieve the same effect in photographs which are made from the normal point of view of a person in the world—eye-level, looking out. Because of this, his pictures can't be explained away as merely photographic oddities, and thus somehow less "true" than a "real" photograph.

Lee Friedlander, too, has used the same sorts of photographic "mistakes"—overlapping, rhyming forms—in his photographs. But instead of using these effects to imply something about the relation of objects in the world—to imply that the world is the way the photograph makes it look—Bishop uses the "mistakes" for themselves, to argue that it isn't necessarily the

world that's that way (it may be, but that's another question), but the photograph.

It would be a mistake to think of Bishop's concern with photographic form as just a direct transportation to photography of the ideas of modernist painters and sculptors of the last hundred years. Modernism, in broad terms, attempted to substitute for the codes of perspective and denotation the physical presence of the painting itself, treating it not as an illusionistic, theatrical space in which events could occur, but as an event in itself, and an object which existed independent of us, and of the significance we might ascribe to it. This effort to assert the autonomy of the painting as an object—ultimately, an argument for the autonomy of the world—failed, as it was discovered that everything could be significant, if one were looking for significance.

While Bishop's photographs demand that we acknowledge their existence as objects, in the present, they also retain the theatrical, implicitly narrative, space and time of the perspectival illusion. They are both actual and possible. Bishop doesn't try to resolve the paradox of the photograph, but heighten it. His photographs are pictures, but pictures obviously in history, in the same way that all photographs are: they make use of a conventional system of representation.

This investigation of the illusions of photography—an examination primarily, but never exclusively, of the illusion of space in photography—has been the hallmark of Bishop's work since he was a graduate student at San Francisco State College in the late '60s. In a series of photographs which he made while still in school, he used a masking device (similar to a cinema matte) to photograph two scenes, or two aspects of the same scene, on a single frame of $2\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ film. In many of

the prints from this series, the edges of the two scenes blended together, producing one apparently unified, but distorted, space. Later, in his *Space-Technology* series, Bishop rephotographed assemblages of objects, maps, photographs, and other pictures; the only pictorial space in these photographs was that of the photographs used in the assemblages. Many of these were astronomical photographs, in which the depiction of space is profoundly ambiguous: perspective ceases to function, for all practical purposes, and objects at enormous distances from one another are reduced to white dots on a common black ground.

It was in 1972, when he began working outdoors again, that Bishop first used the PC lens. However, the control which this lens gave him over the arrangement and overlap of lines and forms within the frame was only one part of his technique. He also worked with the vignetting (and the consequent disruption of the frame) which the lens would produce if its movable elements were shifted too far off center, and the illusions which toning could produce in the black and white prints.

In his color work, Bishop has simplified his technique. Abandoning his use of vignetting and chromatic shifts, he has relied on his ability to affect the composition of a scene with the PC lens, as well as on finding scenes which fit into his formal program.

Although Bishop's primary concern in his work is to carry out his almost systematic program of formal experimentation, he does so by making photographs. And in doing this he makes use of the gestures and connotations of commonplace objects to create elegant, dramatic photographs of scenes which have a consistent, slightly ominous feeling to them. The nearly compulsive orderliness of Bishop's photographs serves as a

background, and an environment, in which photographic dramas take place. These are often based on the implied relationship between two objects, whose details suggest a connection of some sort. For example, in the photograph of a lawnmower handle leaning against a battered light pole (reproduced in this catalogue), the little specks of yellow paint on the light pole, like specks of blood on a fender, speak of a violent encounter between the two objects in the recent past. At the same time, the gentle parting of the lawnmower handles around the pole has a soft, resigned quality to it. The eerie colors of the scene, sickly green and overripe yellow (and complimentary!), reinforces this mood.

In another of the color photographs reproduced here, of a metal barrier with one red warning flag hanging from it, in front of a yellow backhoe, the two end sections of the barrier, like successive frames on a contact sheet, serve to frame the flag and the wheel hub. The flag, moving slightly (it seems) in the wind, contrasts sharply with the bluntly geometric wheel hub, which looks like an impassive face.

The two aspects of Bishop's work—formal inquiry and story telling—are, of course, inseparable. In his best work Bishop meshes the two impulses, creating pictures in which objects become eloquent, and exist within a complexly ironic, shimmering, self-conscious space.

It is only within the limited system of information of the photograph that we can accept the spatial illusion it creates. Like magic, the mechanics of the illusion are usually hidden from us—in the case of a magic trick, by the physical and psychological dexterity of the magician, and in the case of the photograph, by the fact that perspective is produced by a piece of technology, a machine, which is given to us: a lens, which we have had nothing to do with creating, and whose principles we need not understand in order to use it. In both cases, the effect is based on technique: a learned process, known to specialists but not to us. By forcing photography to reveal its tricks, Bishop, through his photographs, reminds us that it is our creation, and its abilities are those we have given it.

Charles Hagen

Chromes

