

Desmarais to leave: What now, Columbia?

Photography / David Elliott

IT LOOKS LIKE Charles Desmarais, who turned Columbia College's Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography into the most exciting, adventurous photo showroom in town, will leave there this June. That's bad news, especially as it may represent an exhibition policy shift by the college.

According to John Mulvaney, head of the photo department, the school "simply wants to assert its policy, which is not new, of running the gallery as an outlet for both photography and art, principally crafts and ethnic arts. For monetary and other reasons we need to have one director who can handle both. Charles isn't interested in that, and isn't the man for it."

But according to Desmarais, he is interested. And I'm not alone in thinking that he's the man for it. Certainly he's bright and open-minded enough to give the other arts a fair shake at the center.

A YOUNG BUT nationally respected critic and editor, Desmarais was brought in two years ago from Rochester, N. Y., where he was assistant editor for *Afterimage*, to run a progressive and (he says) fairly autonomous gallery. He turned the new space at 600 S. Michigan into a platform for the best in modern photography. Not bound by commercial imperatives, the center is the only place in Chicago that consistently rivals New York's innovative Light Gallery, and Desmarais has planned exhibits, catalogs and other events with exquisite professionalism.

"My perception is that the gallery should continue reaching outside," he said. "The

school's perception is that it should be more school-centered. I did offer to develop the other exhibits to the level of photography. There *definitely* has been a change in policy, and I was told that the school would make a public statement to that effect. When I was brought here, I was asked, 'How are you going to put the gallery on the map?' Now that it's on the map, they're changing direction."

Is Columbia making a big mistake? Desmarais is the magnet who took a serious but rather sleepy gallery, and gave it a cutting edge and serious reputation in the nation's most exciting art form. Don't Mulvaney (who is, by the way, a talented photographer) and Mirron Alexandroff, the school's president, know that faculty, students, photographers and the public will profit more from the work shown by Desmarais than by inward-turning school exhibits? And don't they know they may be losing the essential force in one of their school's outstanding assets?

Though Mulvaney denies it, Desmarais says he offered to do student and faculty shows, which do have a place—a limited place—on such a gallery's calendar. Columbia does have other spaces used for school shows and will soon be opening a downstairs gallery at the center.

I sense that budget and pliable "policy" are being used to curb independence—and that will almost surely blunt creativity. Desmarais is one of those rare people who make a gallery great, and when someone like him leaves, the usual result is decline and dissipation of force. If Columbia goes ahead with this, it'll have a hard time filling his shoes.

TYPICAL OF HIS contributions is the current show of work by Michael Bishop, through April 14. The Rochester artist is pro-

lific yet not patchy—there's a steady arc of growth in these more than 100 prints, from the small, often murky views of the late '60s to his larger black and white "Tones" of the early '70s, and then the recent, often even larger color prints called "Chromes."

Bishop's world is thick and tense with directional pointers (often road signs, markers and fences) and tools and machines seen fairly close up. Objects are "found" but not simply left there—Bishop organizes them into dramas of suggestion that are both witty and,

because they're so bluntly contemplated, a little bit sinister. In Bishop's view, these simple things demand respect.

It's a junk esthetic, immaculately organized. The objects exist in a space as silent as a museum case, but are rhythmically alive. Color is used poppingly, with delight in ribbon-currents of hue, but almost never romantically. Like many of the best moderns, Bishop neither inflates nor deflates what he sees, but looks with a careful absorption in the mystery that what is, is, and worth our atten-

Typical of Charles Desmarais' contribution to Columbia College's Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography is the current show of work by Michael Bishop, whose view of a lock, though here lacking its popping color, shows his gripping hold on mundane places.

tion. He's a thinker with a camera, reminding us that the eyes are an extension of the brain—and that the "mundane" world is a prodigious place.

