

Art in America

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Lewis Stein at Postmasters

Lewis Stein recently exhibited two untitled series of works, one from 1968 and the other from 1986. The earlier series consisted of ten household hammers, each painted in a two-tone color scheme—raspberry and orange, for example—which subverted the normally aggressive, "masculine" function of the hammers. Rendered nonfunctional, their garish "prettiness" seemed intentionally gratuitous and alienating.

The 1986 series consisted of 12 three-foot-square black-and-white photographs, each of a different illuminated light bulb or fixture. The identical compositions—a high-contrast white bulb centered on a square black ground—were deadpan records of light without atmosphere, complexity or subjectivity.

Conceptually, the hammers stand apart from recent, altered readymades by artists such as Koons, Steinbach and Sherrie Levine, which implicate artistic production in consumerism and mass production. (And of course Stein's hammers date back 18 years.) Stein refers to Heidegger in describing the hammers as "ready-to-hand" objects that have been thwarted.

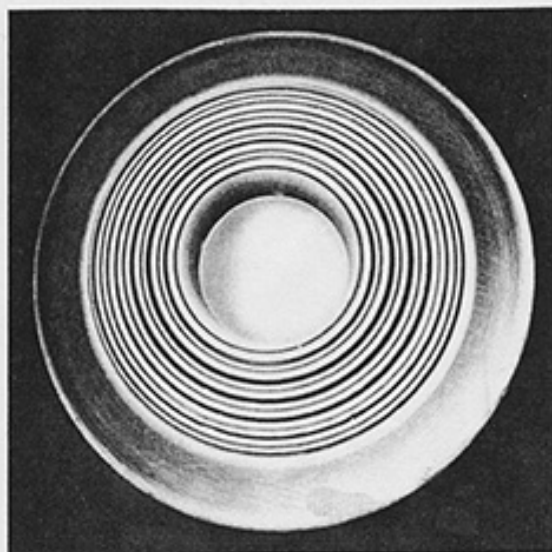
They relate to a number of his other works from the '70s: doors chained so they can't be opened; an automatic door installed uselessly in the center of a room; step-on garbage

cans placed on display, empty; a wall-mounted button that makes a buzzing sound when pressed. Stein feels that whether the viewer performs or resists the call to action of these works, he has been engaged in "cul-de-sac" experiences aimed at developing "a heightened awareness of just how caught in the world we are."

Stein's pictures of light can be seen as addressing a similar deadend frustration of function and expectation: in traditional art, light transfixes material reality, rendering it subjective, mutable or romantic; but Stein represents light itself as an object, something you screw into a socket. Nevertheless, my first impression of these works was of strikingly elegant, simple beauty. Like the "ganged" photographs of Richard Prince or the works of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Stein's other recent photographic series—of surveillance cameras, shadows and chandeliers—suggest that he is not so interested in frustration per se as he is in the rich visual possibilities of this readymade world.

The gallery's press release described Stein's work as in a conceptual tradition, but in the actual photographs Stein seems seduced into straightforward realist observation. One wonders how strategic photographic representation will prove to be in the overall development of his work.

—Paul Smith



Lewis Stein: Untitled #2, 1984-86, black-and-white photograph, 36 inches square; at Postmasters.