



Lewis Stein, *Untitled #3, 1989*, Cibachrome on board,
38 x 37 x 1/4".

LEWIS STEIN

PAULA ALLEN GALLERY

Lewis Stein's new photographic works operate somewhere between the imagistic cancellation of Roy Lichtenstein's mirror paintings and the horror vacui of Allan McCollum's surrogates. The specificity of influence would completely bog down a less focused esthetic proposition, but here, where the work intimates its own disappearance, specificity becomes a distinct advantage. Stein's method is simple. He first selects reproductions of mirrors from mail-order catalogues. He then photographs them and blows them up to life-size, laminating each print to a thin board which has been cut to match the contours of the particular mirror. The result is a shaped photo-object with pointed Minimalist, Pop, and Conceptual art connotations. But curiously enough, a creeping shoddiness overrides the too-familiar elegance this hybridiza-

tion typically yields and relies upon; the backing is left exposed, apparent to the viewer from any oblique angle, and the specter of mail-order furnishings does not exactly conjure up visions of luxury.

The effect of these pictures is one of blankness—like someone staring, grinning, into your face with nothing whatsoever to say. Yet it goes further, metaphorically denying even the presence of the viewer: no image ever appears in these pictures—nothing, just vacuous mirrors. This brings Stein close to a less apparent predecessor—namely, Andy Warhol, who once complained, "I'm sure I'm going to look into a mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see?" Because absolute pictorial absence is the content of Stein's mirrors, what there is to see is only representations of various frames, all of which are quotidian, if not tacky, leaving a kind of guilty connivance between the sublime and the banal.

Because these images derive from advertising, their blankness is intentional. Few customers would be inclined to buy a mirror bearing the leering countenance of another prospective owner. Therefore, the very function of the mirror, as it is represented in the print ad, must be nullified in order to appeal to the widest possible range of consumers. This observation dovetails precisely with the disquieting resemblance between Stein's blown-up, half-tone screens and Lichtenstein's Ben-Day dots, in which the goal is to produce the illusion that the viewer, in effect, is not there. With the pictorial itself thoroughly occluded, only vestigial mirror frames allow Stein to confront us with any representation at all. The strength of Stein's photographs lies in their making this ideological embeddedness explicit.

—John Miller