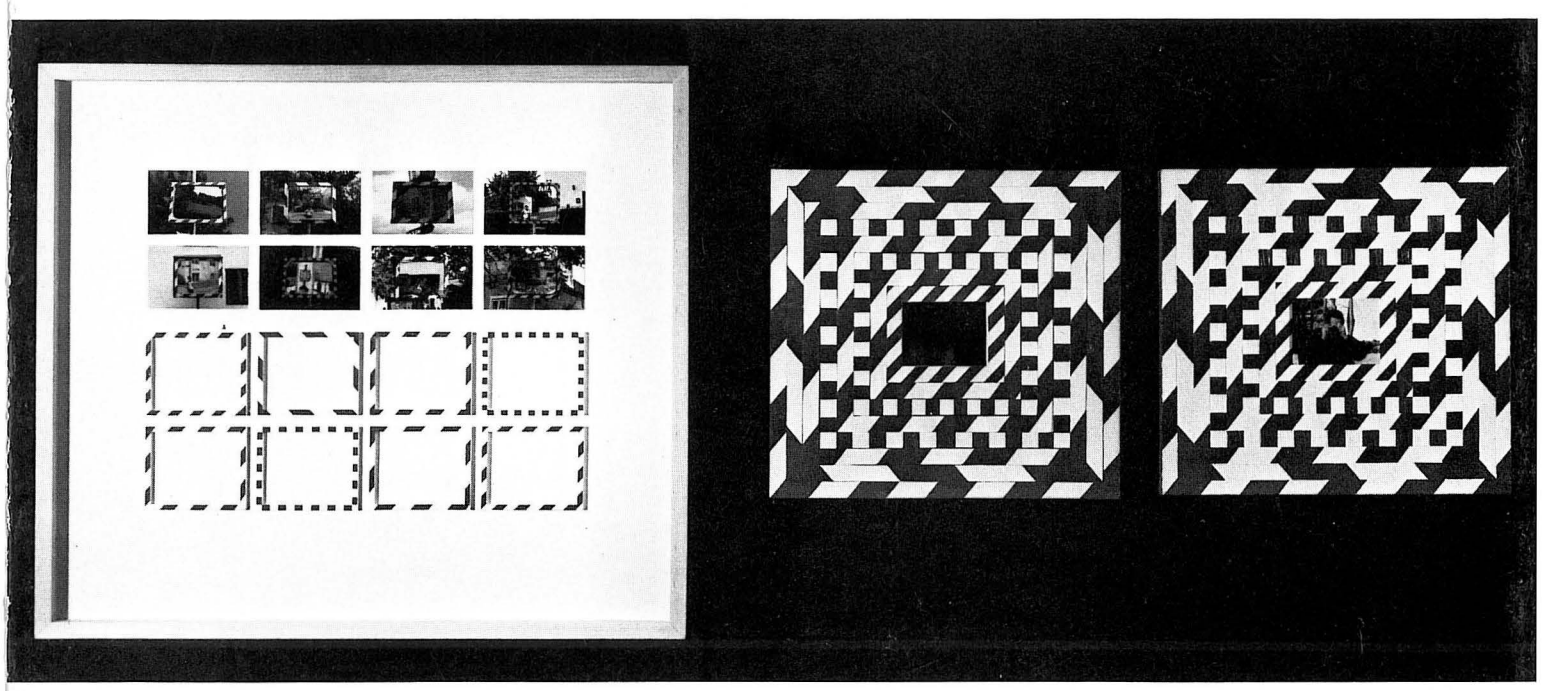
CURRENTS

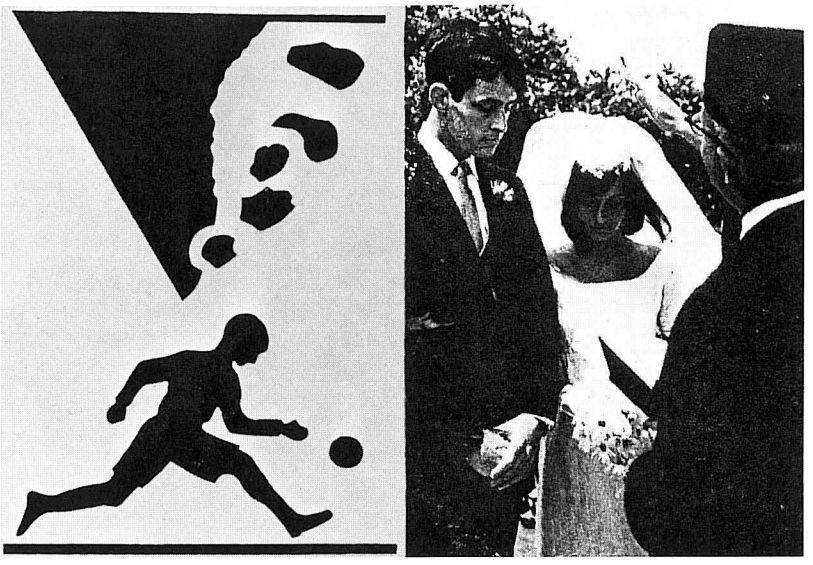
June 12—July 29, 1982

The New Museum

Al Souza



Al Souza



Bitter Suite, 1982. Mixed media. 26 x 34".
Courtesy of O.K. Harris, New York, and
Delahunty Gallery, Dallas.

Photographs lie. They steal, cheat, and seduce. Yet despite their infidelities to empirical reality, they are often called upon as objective witnesses for their corroborating testimonies. This duality partially stems from photography's genealogy—invented by a scientist (Niépce) and an artist (Daguerre). It is the high factual index of the photograph, a slice of time and light phenomenologically extracted by a mechanical recording device, that accounts for the medium's immeasurable impact on the way we perceive the world.

Al Souza first realized the extent of photography's distortion in 1972 when he encountered some Bruce Nauman sculptures. Having seen them reproduced in art magazines earlier, Souza, at that time a painter, felt an affinity with Nauman's work.

> When I saw the actual pieces, I found that they were painterly, quite light, very delicate and hollow. In many ways they were diametrically opposed to what I had thought they were. My pieces were very much like the photographs of his works; they conformed to the information which was in the photographs.[1]

It was at this point that Souza initiated a systematic exploration of the nature of the photographic process, using it to critique the manner by which photography encodes and translates the world into a system of information, signs, and facsimiles. Since 1974, Souza has been producing "photoworks," a term that he concocted to pun on the relative function and disposition of the "photo" in the "art work."

Souza does not make photographs. Though he shoots his own images, he has been employing Kodak to develop his negatives and to produce "R"-type (3 1/3 x 5") prints, creating a "found image" look. This assures that his photoworks will not be confused with fine art photography, since technical virtuosity is not germane to his more conceptual concerns. Moreover, by "collaborating" with Kodak, Souza invokes the genre of the snapshot, enabling him to comment on a popularly accepted cultural given. The singer Paul Simon suggested a similar notion when he wrote the refrain of a song in 1973:

> Kodachrome,
> They give us those nice bright colors,
> They give us the greens of summer,
> Makes you think all the world a sunny day.[2]

Kodak has effectively franchised a contemporary industrial standard of

what, for the eighteenth century, was called "the picturesque."

Souza's presentation is emphatically precise and clean, consistently simple, direct, and neutral; the scale always small and, at times, intimate. An arrangement of the glossy color photographs is mounted in evenly spaced rows and columns on a piece of rag board. The resulting grid of prints has an undeniable sense of purpose, suggestive of a collection of clinical data.[3]

Invariably, the imagery in the photographs is paired with an object (or objects) located beneath them on the inside and bottom of the box enclosing the rag board. Like Joseph Cornell, Souza relishes the distinction between the box and a frame, the former acting as a container of objects, an insular miniature environment, while the latter serves as a way to isolate, surround, and visually set off an image. Souza explains,

> I want [the box] to be a controlled place, one small area where I can control the background, the depth, the shadows, the lighting, the warmth, or coolness.[4]

In *Silly People* (1975), the earliest photowork included in this exhibition, Souza confronts the viewer with what he calls "residue," i.e. filtered information. Like the image of Christ's face on St. Veronica's veil, the ink likenesses of each person visible in the sixteen photographs have been lifted off newsprint by "Silly Putty" and re-photographed. Of course, the newspaper had screened off the original photographs by a half-tone process even before the putty had transferred the images, further reducing their resolution. The faces of the people on the amorphous substance have been cumulatively removed from reality as they are repeatedly and mechanically regenerated. Thus, multiple levels of the distancing of factual information are presented. In addition, by denying the verbal context (newspaper captions or stories) which might explain why we are looking at these people in the first place, Souza cleverly satirizes the phenomenon of "photo-fame" or media depersonalization. The humorous title belies the seriousness of the subject. Ironically, the putty, which has ingested these people's most public physiognomies, remains stalwartly mute and anonymous—the ultimate dumb object. Clearly, Souza is addressing the camera's objectification of people which occurs in such awesome proportion today that we are practically helpless against it.

All of Souza's photoworks pursue comparable lines of inquiry. *M & M's* (1976) examines preconceptions of correspondence[5], the ability of color photographs to make anything appear more attractive than it really is, and the manipulations of advertising and commercial packaging. *Cows* (1977) depicts the photographer's dilemma concerning fictional (studio) versus documentary (location) shooting. (Which cow is the most "real": the photographs of the cows in the fields, the photographs of the toy cows in the studio set, or the actual toy cows at the bottom of the box?) *Insects* (1977) similarly mocks the credibility of the scientific specimen, here photographically documented to deceive the viewer into accepting an entomological *trompe l'oeil.* The nine bugs impaled below on pins have been placed on *National Geographic* photographs of places that are anything but their natural habitats and re-photographed to simulate fact.

Missing Road Signs (1978), a comment on our tendency to regard circumstances as typical, is the culmination of several pieces using the universal visual language of road signs. Souza removes the signifier (he literally cuts the diamond-shaped warning signs out of the prints) and activates a fundamental aspect of human nature: the need to derive meaning from disparate sources. We find ourselves trying to solve a puzzle, mentally replacing missing signs of the photographs with the toy signs below. However, Souza does not provide sufficient information in the peripheral scenes to allow the viewer to fulfill his or her urge for resolution. His explanation for this is that "what is considered typical is really atypical."[6]

Following these pieces, Souza's use of the sequence of photographs becomes almost cinematic, exploiting the viewer's inclination to scan from upper left to lower right, at times to subvert accepted order (e.g., *Mona,* 1980). The objects used are "unfixed,"[7] no longer mounted or immobile, and directly manifest the laws of chance (e.g., *Corsica-Halstatt Puzzle,* 1978). Soon after this, the objects are no longer "on the shelf," but are paired with the photographs in the grid in order to trigger a dialog between identical motifs recorded by the camera and rendered by hand (e.g., *Landscape Paintings,* 1980).

Souza's increasingly active and more visible hand, evidenced by his return to painting (e.g., *Paint Lines,* 1979) and sculptural manipulations—cutting, constructing, destroying (e.g., *The Painting,* 1979)—signals an expanded scope of subject matter including deliberately personal ideas and references. *Woodpile/Tent* (1981), a pivotal piece, is obliquely autobiographical. The abstract photographs which embody a subjective element, a less specific orientation, are reiterated by Souza's urge to paint (and thereby to further "subjectify") these already mysterious images. These photographs are taken inside the tent; they are of light-and-shadow patterns of leaves soaking through the translucent canvas. The use of the exterior source seen from within is then contrasted metaphorically with the more conveniently objective photographs of the yard, woodpile, and house below. The counterpoint between the house and the tent, the permanent home versus the temporary, nomadic one, is charged with symbolic associations.

Austrian Mirrors (1981-82), the most recent photowork, probes further into this intimate territory. While in Europe a year ago, Souza became fascinated by mirrors that enable drivers to see around blind corners. He was particularly interested in the way the Austrians use red-and-white striped frames as a visual code to signify the presence of these mirrors, emphasizing the potentially dangerous conditions. Intuitively, Souza began photographing them. Because of the streets' configurations, he sometimes found that he could not avoid appearing in the mirror while

shooting. Thus they became unintentional self-portraits.

In the finished piece, Souza presents the viewer with three separate elements. The box contains two rows of four photographs of each of the various mirrors, echoed in the two rows below by correspondingly red-and-white painted, but empty, frames. The two other components are outside of the box: the concentric, red-and-white frames containing a small mirror in the center and an identical version of this sculptural aspect, except that it is painted on stretched linen with a small, painted self-portrait of the artist taking a photograph. Given the original function of these mirrors, to act as a warning sign and to provide a view of an otherwise visually inaccessible place, this piece can be seen to operate on the metaphorical level of a search for identity.

Lest we regard this as an exercise in narcissism, it should be noted that Souza's reflection is always depicted in the *act* of photographing. The fact that he has also painted this image implies that he is concerned with a more subjective understanding of the shooting process. Moreover, the frames, the most active formal element in this piece, allude to the camera's viewfinder, the aspect of photography which abstracts reality by isolating objects and places. Souza is not the subject; rather he is the contained object of scrutiny. The metaphor of the frame suggests self-knowledge through the recognition of one's limits. Souza indicates the instrument and process by which he defines and expresses himself, but it is the concentricity of those edges that leads him to the center, where it is ultimately possible to focus on himself clearly.

Souza's most recent work combines the motif of the road sign with a new metaphor: camouflage. He has now left the photograph behind and completely abandoned the box in order to again explore contrasts between universal designation and individual signature, clarity and obfuscation, reason and emotion. For *Small American Painting* (1982) and *Small Austrian Painting* (1982), Souza selected the schematic images for the left (objective) sides of these painted diptychs. He asked his two children to draw images of these figures on the right (subjective) sides based on his verbal descriptions of what these pictographs designate.[8] He subsequently painted this right canvas in a random manner, seeking to disguise the children's drawings in a densely packed and arbitrary composition. Thus, general directive sign language is superseded by specific, emotional marks.

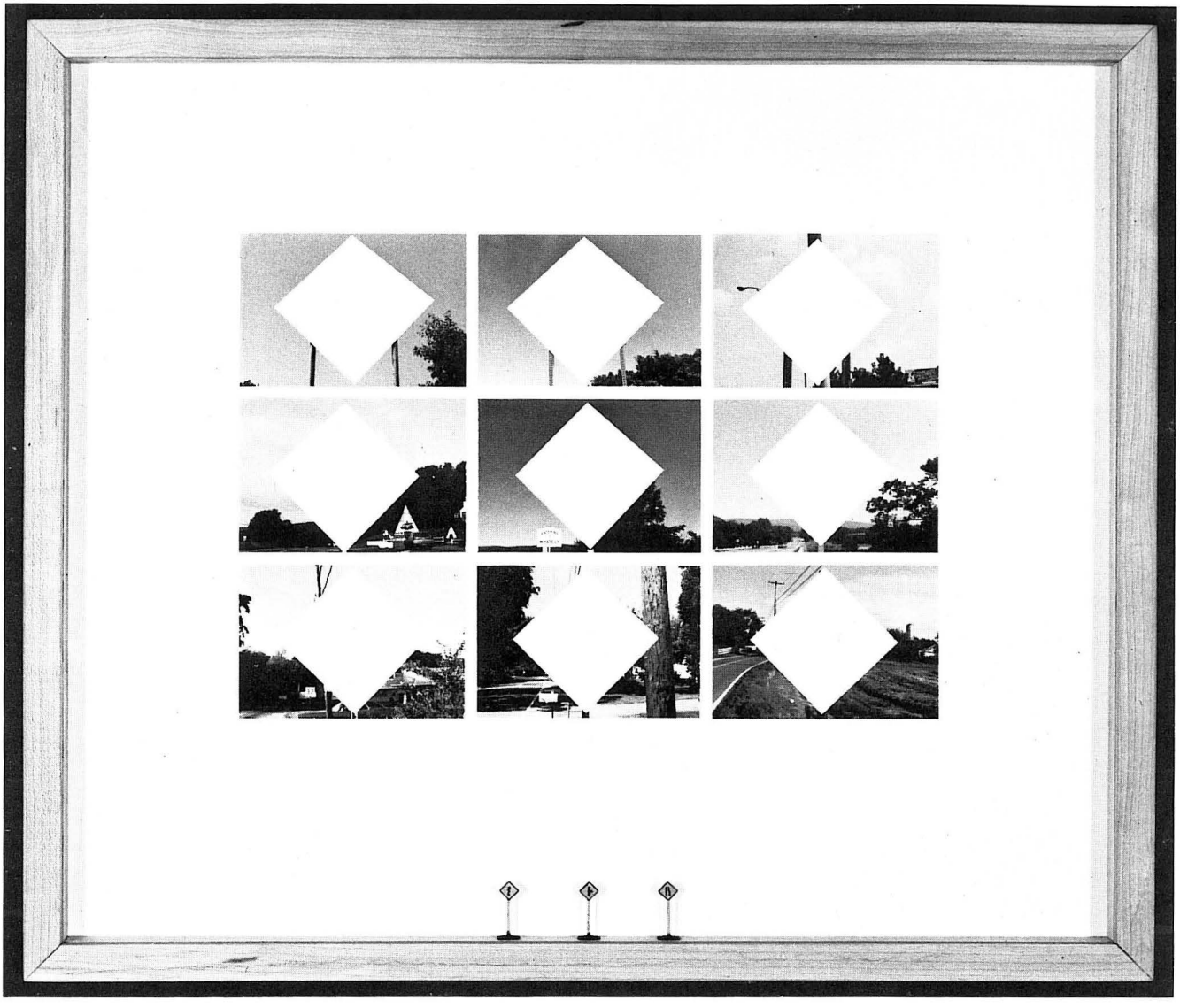
In *Bitter Suite* (1982), a series of ten works on paper, camouflage remains an active device, now paired with Souza's use of photographs from his past. Significantly, he no longer uses Kodak prints, but xerox transfers from slides which, as Souza states, "finally gets the painted image and the photographic image down on the same level."[9] An inventory of his personal photographs yielded images that are emotionally charged (e.g., his wedding, his children) or casually nostalgic (e.g., three artist-friends in Yugoslavia). Souza matches these visual reminiscences with his current understanding of the past which has changed significantly with time.

What he has learned in his ten years of making art which is primarily concerned with the exterior world is now applied to his personal life. In the early photoworks, Souza was careful to examine and manipulate visual contexts. He now realizes that time is the one context that you cannot change, but which inevitably changes you. In looking back at his family scrapbooks and snapshots, Al Souza is coming to terms with a beguiling fact: photographs do *not* lie.

Ned Rifkin
Curator

Notes

1. Hugh Davies, "Interview with Al Souza," *Al Souza,* ex. cat. (Amherst, Mass.: University of Mass, 1979), n.p.
2. © 1973 Paul Simon
   "® Kodachrome is a registered trademark"
   Used by permission.
3. Souza, who holds a degree in civil engineering, worked as an aeronautical engineer for Sikorsky Aircraft for three years. The experience of designing helicopter propeller blades on graph paper may well be the source for this grid arrangement of the Kodak prints.
4. Davies interview.
5. Though there are twelve photographs, Souza intentionally "lies" by placing only eleven empty bags of M & M's below on the bottom of the box. This offsets the viewer's tendency to construe the arrangements of the candy as each representing the contents of one bag. This then renders the nature of the relationship between the photographs and the objects as equivocal.
6. Davies interview.
7. "Fixing" is a technical step in the process of printing a photograph. Souza seems to be making a double visual pun on this in *Corsica-Halstatt Puzzle* since he "fixes" the prints to the rag board and "fixes" the transformation of one European town into another. However, the pieces of jig-saw puzzle which bear the photographic fragments of these towns are "unfixed," left at the bottom of the box, to redistribute themselves randomly.
8. Souza has been intrigued by children's "innocent eyes" for many years. His involvement with using toys stems from watching his own children encounter their playthings. He realized that these objects were designed to embody certain cultural archetypes. Now that his children are older, he is involving them in his art in a more sophisticated manner.
9. Quoted from a conversation between the artist and the author, April 1, 1982.



Missing Road Signs, 1978.
Mixed media. 20¾ x 24¼ x 1¼".
Collection of Marilyn and Gary Hellinger,
Greenwich, Conn.

Cover: *Austrian Mirrors,* 1981-82. Mixed media.
Left: 26 x 29½ x 1½"; middle and right: 15 x 16" each.
Courtesy of O.K. Harris, New York, and
Delahunty Gallery, Dallas.

Al Souza
Born in Plymouth, Mass., 1944. Attended University of Massachusetts, Amherst (B.S. 1967, M.F.A. 1972) and Art Students League, New York. Lives in Amherst, Mass.

Selected Solo Exhibitions
1975 Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck, Austria
O.K. Harris Works of Art, New York *(also 1976, 78, 79, 81)*
1976 American Cultural Center, Paris
Cronin Gallery, Houston *(also 1978, 79)*
1977 Canon Photo Gallery, Geneva
1978 Dobrick Gallery, Chicago *(also 1980)*
Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, Halifax
1979 University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (cat. essay by Hugh Davies)
1980 Delahunty Gallery, Dallas
Al Souza—Photoworks, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt (cat. essay by Peter Weiermair)
1981 Work Gallery, Zurich
1982 Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas

Selected Group Exhibitions
1973 *Edinburgh Arts* '73, Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh
1976 *Copier/Recopier,* Galerie Gaetan, Geneva (cat.)
New Photography II, Museum of Modern Art, Belgrade (cat. essay by John Perreault)
Venice Biennale, Galerie Ecart, Swiss Pavilion, Venice
1977 *Outside the City Limits,* Thorpe Intermedia Gallery, Sparkill, N.Y. (cat. essay by John Perreault)
Some Color Photographs, Castelli Graphics, New York
Warm Truths and Cool Deceits, University Art Gallery, California State University, Chico (cat. essay by Max Kozloff; traveled)
1978 *Painting and Sculpture Today,* Indianapolis Museum of Art (cat.)
Contemporary Art and Modern Living, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston
1979 *Photographie als Kunst/Kunst als Photographie,* Tiroler Landesmuseum, Innsbruck (cat.; traveled)
1980 *Maps,* Museum of Modern Art, New York
Response, Tyler Museum of Art, Tyler, Tex. (cat. essay by Ned Rifkin)
1981 *16th Biennial of Sao Paulo,* Sao Paulo
To Be Continued, Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester (cat.; traveled)

Selected Bibliography (Articles and Reviews)

Bell, Tiffany. "Reviews," *Arts Magazine,* vol. 52, June 1978, p. 31; and vol. 53, March 1979, p. 32.
Corey, David. "Al Souza," *Arts Magazine,* vol. 52, June 1978, p. 9
Foote, Nancy. "The Anti-Photographers," *Artforum,* vol. 14, September 1976, p. 52.
Frank, Peter. "Form Follows Fiction,"*Village Voice,* April 24, 1978, p. 84.
Kozloff, Max. "Reviews," *Artforum,* vol. 13, March 1975, pp. 65-66.
Tarlow, Lois. "Alternative Space—Al Souza," *Art New England,* vol. 2, Summer 1981, cover and pp. 12-13.

Works in the Exhibition
Unless otherwise noted, all works are on loan by the artist courtesy of O.K. Harris Works of Art, New York, and Delahunty Gallery, Dallas. All works are mixed media unless noted; dimensions are in inches, and height precedes width precedes depth.

Silly People (1975); 25¼ x 30¼ x 2¼

M & M's (1976); 25½ x 30½ x 3½
Collection of Mr. & Mrs. David Solomon, New York

Cows (1977); 25½ x 30½ x 2
Collection of Martin Harman Inc., New York

Insects (1977); 21½ x 25 x 2
Collection of Robert V. Kelly, New York

Corsica-Halstatt Puzzle (1978); 24½ x 29¾ x 2⅛
Collection of Arthur and Jeanne Cohen, New York

Missing Road Signs (1978); 20¾ x 24¼ x 1¼
Collection of Marilyn and Gary L. Hellinger, Greenwich, Conn.

Paint Lines (1979); 24 x 29 x 2¼
Collection of Anthony and Judy Evnin, Chappaqua, N.Y.

The Painting (1979); 24 x 29 x 2½
Collection of Pasquale Anthony Pagnotta, New York

Landscape Paintings (1980); 24 x 29 x 1¾
Collection of Marvin Sussman, Bethlehem, Conn.

Mona (1980); 31½ x 29 x 3

Sports Puzzle (1980); Polaroid SX-70; 28 x 26

Flower Bed (1981); 25½ x 54 x 2
Collection of Viki List, Rosemont, Penn.

Woodpile/Tent (1981); 23¾ x 30¼ x 3
Collection of Prudential Insurance Company of America

Austrian Mirrors (1981-82); left: 26 x 29½ x 1½, middle and right: 15 x 16 each

Fotomat (1981-82); 25⅛ x 29¼ x 3

Small American Painting (1981-82); left: 25 x 24, right: 18 x 36

Small Austrian Painting (1981-82); left: 21 x 19, right: 18 x 36

Triominoes (1981-82); 45 x 29¾ x 2½

Bitter Suite (1982); ten 26 x 34

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