

MATRIX/BERKELEY 124
Al Souza

University Art Museum
early March - early April 1989

Marco's Gift, 1989



*The Encyclopedia
of
Contest Pictures*

Using vibrant, transparent lines, Al Souza layers found images. In Mainstreams, he painted a weather map over a math book picture of boys swimming. Over these he painted a Japanese discourse on the use of a flush toilet. Souza compares his work to "picking up the wrong book." Like an almanac, it piques the curious viewer with diverse information from many sources.

Souza often chooses images which purport to explain or instruct. Such declarative images are potent, and we tend to accept them as unassailably factual. Souza, however, reads every image as an opinion expressed in a particular context. His sandwiching of images undermines their uniqueness and thereby dissipates their authority.

In the 1970s, Souza played with the truthful appearance of photography. Four Lies (1975) consists of sixteen photographs of an apple. Under each is a statement about the apple (e.g., "The temperature of this apple is 68 degrees"). Actually, all of the statements, including the title, are false. Thus, this work belies two common assumptions: that art should be honest, and that photography records reality. Questioning such assumptions is one key to Souza's work.

Another important aspect of his work is active interpretation. In Private Dancer he replicates one of Posada's cavaleras prints, a scenario in which suitor-skeletons dance before waitress-skeletons. Illustrating certain Mexican attitudes about death, Posada's woodcut was initially intended for people from a particular

culture. Nevertheless, its combination of joy and grief can be appreciated when seen in contrast to European attitudes--especially about death as catastrophe--suggested by a detail from Dürer of an apocalyptic explosion, which Souza uses to embellish the Posada.

Souza's paintings, like montage in film, suggest discontinuity yet induce interpretation. "From the collision of two given factors," wrote Sergei Eisenstein, "arises a concept."* For Souza, thinking is a "collision" of images, and a making sense of a plurality of ideas and impressions.

Even Souza's process serves as a metaphor for expanded visual meaning: he magnifies images. He projects small images taken from books onto large canvasses. After he copies out the projections, the once intimate images can be viewed simultaneously by numerous people. Generally, he selects images that were first realized through printmaking: images with an essential, technical potential for wide distribution. Ironically, however, they were most often created as instructional illustrations and descriptions, which addressed limited concerns. Souza achieves a democratization of images by juxtaposing them.

It is helpful to understand Souza's work as a conceptual parallel to Cubism. Cubism was devoted to depicting the physical world, especially common objects. In order to express this devotion, the Cubists employed all materials, from oil paint to newsprint, with equal diligence. Furthermore, they

insisted that objects could be fully understood only by juxtaposing several views seen through time and space. Souza is devoted to the depiction of meaning and insists that a concept or attitude can be fully known only by considering several viewpoints expressed at various times, by various populations, and in various styles.

Al Souza was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1944. He received his MFA in 1972 from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he had previously taken a Bachelor's Degree in civil engineering. He attended the Art Students League in New York between 1967 and 1970, and the School of Visual Arts in 1972. He is currently Visiting Artist at San Diego State University.

Michael M. Floss

* Sergei Eisenstein, Film Form (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949/1977).

Works in MATRIX (all works lent by Moody Gallery, Houston, Texas, unless otherwise indicated):

1. Where Can a Blind Man Live, 1986, oil on canvas, 30 x 40". Lent by La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.
2. Sign Language, 1986, oil on canvas, 30 x 42".
3. Gossamer Albatross, 1987, oil on canvas, 41 x 22-1/2".
4. Ideological Swindle, 1987, oil and gesso on paper, 22 x 30".
5. Island Hopping, 1987, oil and gesso on paper, 22 x 30".
6. Mainstreams, 1988, oil on canvas, 72 x 108".
7. Private Dancer, 1988, oil on canvas, 72 x 108".
8. Marco's Gift, 1989, oil on canvas, two panels, 84 x 50". Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, NH '80; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, W. Germany '81 (catalog); Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, TX, '82 (catalog); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC '82 (catalog); OK Harris Gallery, NYC '75-'79, '81, '83; Delahunty Gallery, Dallas, TX '80, '83; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, CA '87; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX '88 (catalog); Barry Whistler Gallery, Dallas, TX '88; Galerie Zeitkunst, Innsbruck, Austria '88; Moody Gallery, Houston, TX '85, '89.

Selected group exhibitions:

Venice Biennale, Italy '76 (catalog); Castelli Graphics, NYC, Some Color Photographs '77; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and Sydney Janis Gallery, NYC, Warm Truths & Cool Deceits '77 (catalog); Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN, Painting and Sculpture Today '78 (catalog); Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Maps '80; Frankfurter Kunstverein, W. Germany, Das Sofortbild '80 (catalog); 16th São Paulo International Biennale, São Paulo, Brazil '81 (catalog); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, Language, Drama, Source and Vision '83 (catalog); Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, Still Lives '84 (catalog); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, Signs '85 (catalog).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Kozloff, Max.
"Reviews," Artforum, March '75.
Foote, Nancy. "The Anti-Photographers," Artforum, Sept. '76.
Frank, Peter. "Form Follows Fiction," Village Voice, April 24, '78.
Corey, David. "Al Souza," Arts Magazine, June '78.
Bell, Tiffany.
"Reviews," Arts Magazine, March '79.
Rifkin, Ned. "Resigning the World," Artweek, Oct. 13, '79.
Bloom, Suzanne and Ed Hill. "Painting Verses Photography and the Deconstruction of Modernism," Afterimage, May '82.
Glueck, Grace.
"Reviews," New York Times, June 18, '82.
Brenson, Michael. "Art: Exhibit of 'Signs' at the New Museum," New York Times, May 17, '85.
Robinson, Joan Seeman.
"Reviews," Artforum, Dec. '88.

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