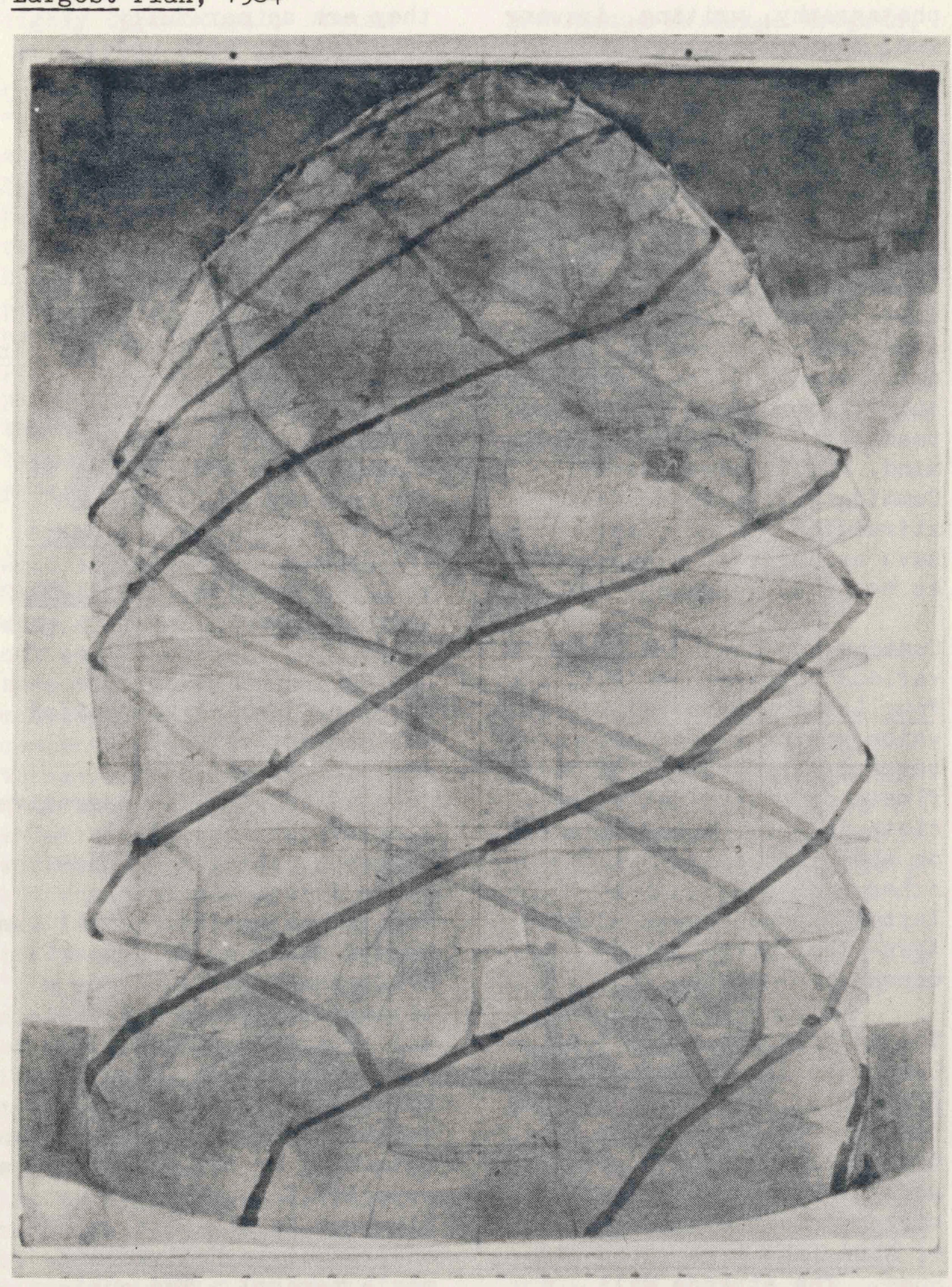
Largest Plan, 1984



The invention and exploration of objects and their relationship to function and to ideas has always been Robert Cumming's obsession, his way of making sense of an ever more complex and frightening world. Certain recurrent themes can be identified as they are permutated in an impressive variety of techniques and media at Cumming's command, including sculpture, photography, writing, drawing and, most recently, painting.

The large mound encircled by a spiral line in Largest Plan was originally suggested by a tree near Cumming's house which had been smothered by a grapevine and also by the beehives he was making at the time. More ominous associations, from an artillery shell to a concrete bunker (depending on how one reads the scale) also come to mind. On a formal level, Cumming admits to a "fatal attraction" to elipses, which have appeared in other works as beehives, cups and bowls.

Cumming has included soaps in various works since 1971.

Four Letter Soaps (NILE), in which a pink bar of soap bearing the name of the river floats on a wavy patterned cloth is, on one level, a pun on the brand name "Dial" and other such simple, fourletter product names--Coke, Ajax--that compete for consumer attention.

The ladder, the subject of Cumming's new lithograph One Frame Step, has taken on many forms, from ordinary to bizarre in Cumming's past works. Several types are worked into the wall pattern of Nine Line Light Room and Home. The strange wall covering in this otherwise conventional room interior

consists primarily of words, including fragments from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. The painting can be viewed as a metaphor for the artist's mind, cataloguing as it does many objects from Cumming's image bank such as scissors, saws and cups.

Although these new acrylic on paper works are more painterly than anything we have seen by Cumming before, they are as carefully constructed, with underlying grids and consistent perspective, as any of his technical style line drawings. Even the organic mound in Largest Plan, built of layers of transparent washes, is laid over a precise, linear drawing of a tower that suggests both skyscrapers and missiles. In Cumming's work, formal devices, such as grids and patterns, are always disguised in objects, as in the undulating background fabric of Four Letter Soaps (NILE) and the window mullions in Nine Line Light Room and Home.

During the 1970s in Los Angeles, Cumming was making tableau or "set-up" photographs and was identified with the narrative wing of the Conceptual movement, along with such other then-Southern California artists as William Wegman and John Baldessari. Conceptualists found photography to be a useful and objective method of documenting their ideaoriented and often temporal works. Cumming, however, was attracted to the photograph's capacity for creating illusion (a capacity wellunderstood by Hollywood's movie makers). The subject of the tableau photographs was carefully staged,

fictional situations. These photographs were often used as illustrations in Cumming's books, six of which have been published to date. During the same time Cumming was making and photographing improbable objects--humorous tools and quirky devices -which included oversized writing instruments, such as pen points to be worn on the arm and a 57" long torsion pen, both functional, if highly impractical, items.

Cumming's interest in
"fictional" photographs waned
at about the same time he
left Southern California for
his native New England. In
recent years he has satisfied
his need to create and
portray fictional situations
by turning to drawing and
painting. The current
paintings, which are
themselves related to a much
larger work, a novel in
progress since 1980.

Just as, or maybe because, Cumming's work takes on so many different forms, it is not easily understood. He sees his recent paintings as a "platform from which to comment on a wide range of things...in which there are many more suggestions than solutions." As in all of his works, he confounds, provokes and engages his audience with his idiosyncratic investigations. As he wrote recently, "I'm not sure the specifics are really important in and of themselves; just as indicators of a manner of make-up, a mode of stewmaking that I think most artists employ. It certainly isn't important to me that the specifics be exactly read by the viewer; would be disappointed if the whole business of art were that pedantic."

Cumming was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1943. He received a B.F.A. in painting from the Massachusetts College of Art in 1965 and an M.F.A. from the University of Illinois two years later. He has received Individual Artist Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1972, 1975 and 1982, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1980 and participated in the Artist in Residence Exchange Program, Japan-American Friendship Commission in 1981. He currently lives in West Suffield, Connecticut, and is Associate Professor at the Unversity of Hartford's Hartford Art School.

Constance Lewallen

Note: All quotes are from a letter written by the artist in May, 1985.

Works in MATRIX:

1. Largest Plan, 1984, acrylic, charcoal, ink and pencil on paper, 77 x 60". Lent by Castelli Graphics, New York and Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles. 2. Four Letter Soaps (NILE), 1984, acrylic, charcoal, ink and pencil on paper, 60 x 77". Lent by Lois and Jerry Magnin, Beverly Hills, CA. 3. Nine Line Light Room and Home, 1985, acrylic, charcoal and pencil on paper, 60 x 77". Lent by The Capital. Group, Los Angeles. 4. Water Above/Water Below, 1985, acrylic on paper, 60 x 77". Lent by Castelli Graphics, New York and Cirrus

Gallery, Los Angeles.

5. One Frame Step, 1985, 6-color lithograph/silkscreen, edition of 65, 39-1/2 x 38". Lent by Castelli Graphics, New York, Cirrus Editions, Ltd., Los Angeles, and Derriere l'Etoile, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

John Gibson Gallery, NY, '73, '75, '77; Gilbert Gallery, Chicago, '78, '79, '80, '81; ThomasLewallen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, '78; Friends of Photography, Carmel, CA, '79 (catalogue; essay by James Alinder); Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, '79; Castelli Graphics, NY, '82, '84, '85; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, MATRIX 85, '85 (artist sheet); Cirrus Gallery, L.A., '85.

Selected group exhibitions:

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Art by Telephone, '69; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, 9 Artists/9 Spaces, '70; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Biennial, '77 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Mirrors & Windows--American Photography Since 1960, '78 (catalogue); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Fabricated to be Photographed, '79 (catalogue); The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 10 Photographers. Olympic Images, '84 (catalogue; essay by Peter Schjeldahl); Awards in the Visual Arts 3, '84 (traveling exhibition; catalogue).

Selected bibliography by the artist:

A Training in the Arts (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973).

A Discourse on Domestic Disorder (Irvine, CA, 1975).

The Nation's Capital in Photography, (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery, 1976).

Equilibrium and the Rotary Disc (Diana's Bimonthly, Vol. VII, 1980).

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

Coleman, A.D. "The Directional Mode," Artforum, Sept. '76.

Hugunin, James. "Robert Cumming 'trucage,' Falsehoods," Afterimage (Rochester, NY), Dec. '78.

Grundberg, Andy. "A
Purposeful Blurring of
Illusion and Reality," The New
York Times, May 30, '82.

Hagan, Charles. "Robert Cumming's Subject Object," Artforum, Summer '83.

Donn, Abbe. "Fragmented Narratives," Artweek (Oakland, CA), April 27, '85.

MATRIX is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency, Mrs. Paul L. Wattis, and the T. B. Walker Foundation.