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# sculpture

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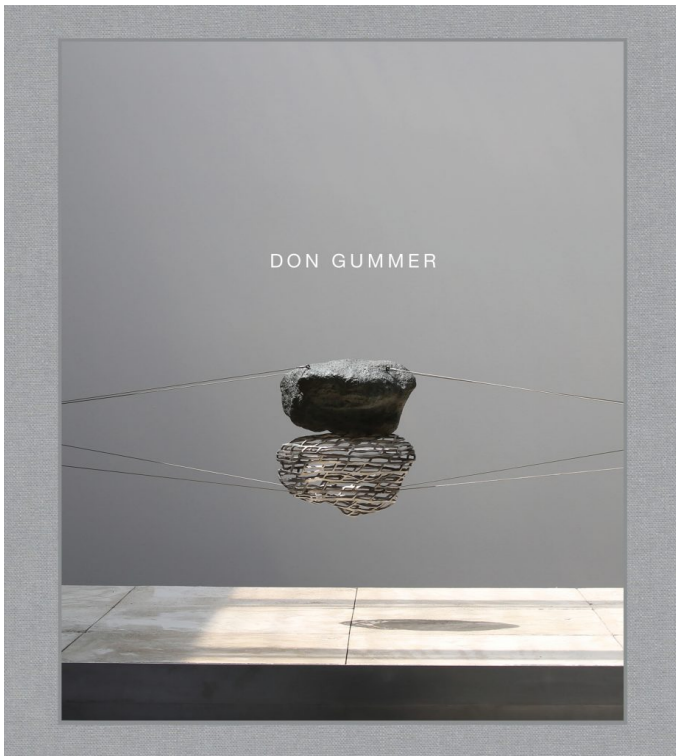
## Visual Impulse

by Jonathan Goodman - Thursday, September 30, 2021

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Don Gummer, *Cindy's Song*, 2015. Stainless steel with stained glass, 192 x 99 x 70 in. Permanent installation at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, Bloomington, IN.



*Don Gummer*, essays by Peter Plagens and Linda Wolk-Simon, introduction by John Yau ([The Artist Book Foundation](#), \$85.)

Published to celebrate Don Gummer's long career, this monograph does an excellent job of covering his multifaceted creativity. For 50 years, the artist has worked across styles, taking a personal approach to various Modernist and Minimalist modes. The book includes a brief artist statement; an introduction by John Yau, who emphasizes Gummer's formal concerns; a comprehensive essay by Peter Plagens, who fills in biographical details and links them to the work; and a strong final article by Linda Wolk-Simon, who concentrates on the drawings.

Together, the texts and images not only bring into focus Gummer's wide-ranging formal achievements, they also explore his thinking, which looks to both the past and the future. Gummer's sculpture clearly reflects the dominant, strongly Minimal themes of his generation, squeezing as much meaning as possible out of the simplest of forms. Some of his works, particularly those employing curved planes of slats, feel like offshoots of a still-living Modernism. A number of pieces from the early 1970s involving rocks balanced or suspended from wires would seem to respond to the spirit of the time some 50 years ago, but Gummer revived their themes much later—in large-scale permanent outdoor installations such as *Primary Separation* (2005, MASSMoCA), *Equator* (2011, Seven Bridges Foundation). *Frontier* (2017, U.S. Embassy, Moscow) marks another avenue of this thread of exploration.

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Much of Gummer's work is large-scale public art. These sculptures, such as the monumental steel *Cindy's Song* (2015), created for the Indiana University music school in Bloomington, are meant for more than visual appreciation; they are also intended for physical interaction. The public meaningfulness of Gummer's work becomes clear in the illustrations; indeed, this aspect of his sculpture—its relation to public, outdoor space—might well have been the subject of another essay. These works emphasize Gummer's willingness to experiment with different ways of making sculpture.

As evidenced by the numerous images of sculptures set among trees, beside streams, and next to buildings, Gummer's work is frequently about relations to the world outdoors, both manmade and natural. The dialogue between artistic and natural form becomes an unexpected and telling theme. Gummer is not an ecological sculptor, and his works are not about natural materials, yet when his sculptures are placed in nature, their slim, upward-curving lines begin to play off organic forms and chunky architectonic compositions take on the presence of built structures. Culture and nature merge in an equality of meaningfulness, distinct yet in conversation.

Gummer's drawings communicate his command of design, as well as his understanding of the medium in relation to sculpture. Wolk-Simon is particularly good at describing the remarkable energy of the two-dimensional works. The drawings not only act as a guide to Gummer's better-known sculptural works, they also function as a body of work in their own right. Because they are meant to help us understand the three-dimensional pieces, as well as stand alone as independent works of art, the drawings possess a multiplicity of purpose that makes them particularly interesting. When we look at *Silk Circle* (1981), we can find the slightly curving horizontal lines in both two and three dimensions. If we regard the drawing first, we recognize the importance of linear expression in relation to the body of the form. It seems that Gummer works more with line than volume, which emphasizes his affinity for flat planes determined by straight lines rather than bulging curves (although the latter also occur).

Gummer's commitment to the studio, and what comes forth from that space, revives an appreciation for work whose catalyst is visually rather than socially driven—we trust his visual impulse, its capacity to involve and delight. The book's three essays, which do an excellent job of exploring Gummer's major themes, make it clear that the greatest attention must be paid to the forms and subject matter at the heart of the artist's work. This is a fine volume that helps us to understand a fine sculptor.

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