

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

© 1995 The New York Observer Company Inc. 4

NEW YORK, JANUARY 30, 1995

Otherworldly Vistas You Can Almost Hear; Images of White

By A.D. Coleman

Among the many cryptic, incomprehensible comments to be found in Susan Sontag's 1976 sortie into photo criticism, *On Photography*, is a scornful aside on "the indifference

Photography of photographers to making space, particularly background space, intelligible." Exactly what Ms. Sontag meant by this (if anything) remains unexplained, yet it has stuck in my mind because photography, more than any other graphic medium, virtually mandates that its practitioners be aware of spatial relationships. Indeed, in no other medium has the exploration of spatial relationships been more deliberate and extensive than in photography, especially in our own time.

Employing a much stricter economy of means, Lynn Stern explores related issues in her *Whiteness Series*, a suite of 18 black-and-white images produced between 1985 and 1987 and now being shown here in its entirety for the first time, at Gallery B.A.I., 575 Broadway (through Feb. 4).

The suite, a unified installation, consists of three groups of 20-by-24-inch gelatin-silver prints, plus a set of six smaller prints. They are all studies of folds and drapes in a white or light-colored cloth of indeterminate size, as seen in natural light. The larger images all describe a similar symmetrical, drooping, vaguely smile-like fold. As with Ms. Helg's imagery, the literal subject matter is immaterial. These images are not about what they are of; though we know they are of cloth, we can hardly tell that by looking at them. Even viewing them up close does not reveal anything of the surface of the cloth, because the images are always slightly out of focus. As a result, they are tonal but not textural, and the sense of scale has been subverted.

These become, then, experiments in lam-bency, their delicate chiaroscuro remaining on this side of the totally abstract only because we know ourselves to be looking at a photograph and can recognize a substance called cloth. Other than that, there is nothing representational to them; even their reference to classical marble sculpture seems incidental.

(As with Georgia O'Keeffe's flower studies, though, several of the smaller prints strongly evoke the erotic.) They stubbornly refuse to function as anything more than surfaces for the eye to move over, spaces for the eye to move through.

Thus they raise this question: What is the relationship in photography between literal and metaphorical content, and what minimum of either or both is required to make an image that holds the attention? That ongoing inquiry, first officially raised by Alfred Stieglitz in his *Equivalents* series of cloud photographs almost a century ago, runs through such midcentury works as Lotte Jacobi's "photogenics" and William Garnett's aerial-view desertscapes; it continues on into our own day with the work of such picture makers as Hiroshi Sugimoto and Jun Morinaga. Ms. Stern's strictly photographic, deeply sensual yet rigorously formal works continue and contribute to that investigation. One hopes that her imminently forthcoming monograph, *Dispossession* (Aperture, \$40 hardbound), will bring her long-term efforts in this vein to wider attention.