

**#72 May 2022 Cameraderie
Frederick Sommer (1905-99)**



Portrait by Edward Weston (#1, Oct. 2012), 1944.

Frederick Sommer is the fifth of five founders of the Center for Creative Photography (CCP) at the University of Arizona that I am currently working through. Before him, I have already discussed Ansel Adams (#12, March 2014), Wynn Bullock (#66, Nov. 2021), Aaron Siskind (#70, March 2022), and Harry Callahan (#71, April 2022).

Sommer is most widely known as a photographer, but also maintained lifelong interests in drawing, painting, collage, poetry, and prose. He is known for his highly original approach to his photography. Subjects include animal parts, macabre still lifes, and landscapes keeping below the horizon line.

I discussed the CCP at length two months ago in the Aaron Siskind article. The website of the CCP is here: <https://ccp.arizona.edu/>

The CCP has an excellent biography of Sommer and summary of his artistic accomplishment in many domains, including photography: <https://ccp.arizona.edu/artists/frederick-sommer> Please look at this website to see many of Sommer's very innovative and original photographic ventures that I don't have space here to even sample.

From the CCP site:

...he began crafting a body of work unparalleled in the history of the medium for its diverse and experimental qualities. He found the Arizona landscape imbued with a surreal quality that resonated with his unique aesthetic sensibilities: a formal elegance and a cool exactitude coupled with a penchant for emotionally charged—and sometimes even shocking or macabre—subject matter. Sommer's work also possesses a technical mastery that has contributed to his status as a legendary photographer.

The Wikipedia article on Sommer is here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Sommer

From the Wikipedia article, here is a totally unique artistic story, even though it is not about photography:

Drawings in the Manner of Musical Scores

In 1934, Frederick Sommer visited Los Angeles. Walking through the art museum one day, he noticed a display of musical scores. He saw them not as music, but as graphics, and found in them an elegance and grace that led him to a careful study of scores and notation.

He found that the best music was visually more effective and attractive. He assumed that there was a correlation between music as we hear it and its notation; and he wondered if drawings that used notational motifs and elements could be played. He made his first “drawings in the manner of musical scores” that year. (After reviewing this text, Fred asked that the author refer to his scores “only” in this way. When the author suggested that it was perhaps too long to be repeated throughout the text, he laughed and said, “Well, use it at least once.”)

Although people knew of his scores, and occasionally brought musicians to his house to play them, no one ever stayed with it for long. In 1967, both Walton Mendelson and Stephen Aldrich attended Prescott College, Prescott, Arizona, where Sommer was on the faculty. They barely knew of his reputation as a photographer, and nothing of the scores. Towards the end of September he invited them to his house for dinner, but they were to come early, and Mendelson was to bring my [his] flute. “Can you play that?” he asked, as they looked at one of the scores, framed, and sitting atop his piano. With no guidance from him, they tried. Nervous and unsure of what they were getting into, they stopped midway through. Mendelson asked Aldrich where he was in the score: he pointed to where Mendelson had stopped. They knew then, mysterious though the scores were, they could be played. On May 9, 1968, the first public performance of the music of Frederick Sommer was given at Prescott College.

Sommer had no musical training. He didn't know one note from another on his piano, nor could he read music. His record collection was surprisingly broad for that time, and his familiarity with it was thorough. What surprised Mendelson and Aldrich when they first met him were his visual skills: he could identify many specific pieces and almost any major composer by looking at the shapes of the notation on a page of printed music.

Of Sommer's known works, his drawings, glue-color on paper, photographs, and writings, it is only these scores that have been a part of his creative life throughout the entirety of his artistic career. He was still drawing elegant scores in 1997. And like his skip reading, they are the closest insight to his creative process, thinking and aesthetic.

The official Sommer website is here, and has extensive samples of his images:

<http://www.fredericksommer.org/>

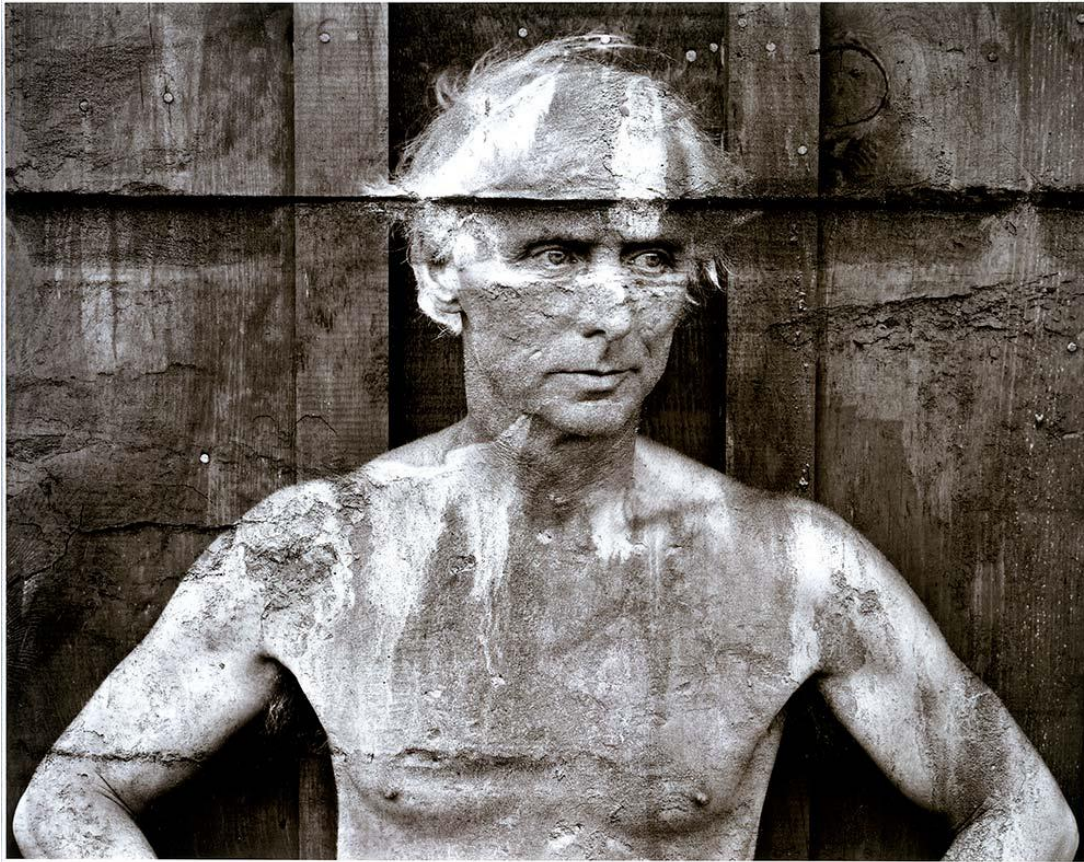
See and browse the following website for many of Sommer's images:

WikiArt (Visual Arts Encyclopedia): <https://www.wikiart.org/en/frederick-sommer>

The National Gallery of Art has an extensive website on Sommer, including articles on his history and various accomplishments: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/photographs/frederick-sommer.html>

Here are some of Sommer's best-known images:

Portrait of [artist] Max Ernst, 1946.



The following commentary is from the Victoria and Albert Museum website documenting an exhibition of Sommer's work: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/f/frederick-sommer-exhibition/>

In his portrait of [artist Max] Ernst, Sommer uses double exposure, combining a photograph of the artist with one of water stains on cement. In doing so, he evokes the Surrealist technique of 'frottage' (rubbing) [which Ernst invented and used in some of his own work] and transforms an otherwise straightforward portrait into an uncanny homage.

The following commentary is from the official Sommer Foundation website:

<http://www.fredericksommer.org/>

Sommer was disappointed with the negative he had taken of the surrealist painter and discarded it in to the corner of his darkroom counter. Later, when cleaning out the corner he picked up the negative with another rejected negative, of water seepage stains on a cement wall and realized he had something special. Exposing the negatives separately (one after the other) onto the same sheet of photographic paper, Sommer created this unique portrait of Max Ernst.

According to the National Gallery of Art website on Sommer:

<https://www.nga.gov/collection/photographs/frederick-sommer.html> , Ernst saw this as the definitive portrait of himself.

Chicken (membrane pulled over head of chicken), 1939.



This is the shocking subject matter mentioned earlier, but it is quite a famous image. Needless to say, there is symbolic meaning in showing a decapitated chicken, and one blinded by its own skin.

The following commentary is from the official Sommer Foundation website:

<http://www.fredericksommer.org/>

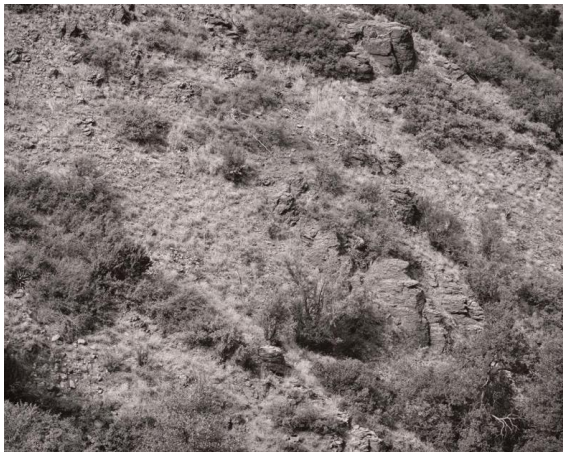
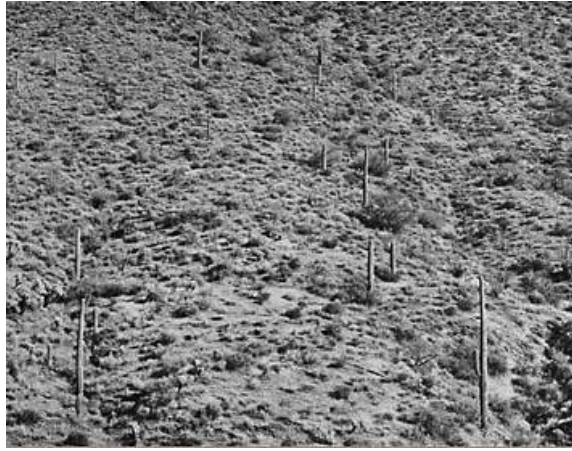
The still life material that had Sommer's attention from 1938 to 1941 was gathered from the butcher's refuse box at the Piggly Wiggly grocery store on the corner of Montezuma and Gurley Streets in Prescott, Arizona. At this time chickens were delivered by the farmers on Thursdays whole and plucked. When you purchased a chicken, the butcher would weigh it, cut off the head, open it up, take out the innards and then finish the job to fit your cooking needs. The contents in the refuse box consisted only of heads, ovipositors, intestines, anuses and testicles of the chickens butchered that day.

Ondine, 1950.



And here is the macabre. The title refers to a mythological water nymph story that has been made into plays, films, ballets, and other art forms throughout the centuries. See this Wikipedia entry for “Undine,” the original form of “Ondine:” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undine_\(novella\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Undine_(novella)). “Undine” is a contributing story to Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* story. As far as this image is concerned, perhaps the “eating” of a doll’s leg by a coarsely-surfaced arm represents a mermaid and a knight in chain mail.

[Four] Arizona [Landscapes], 1943.



These are samples of the horizonless landscapes that Sommers shot in Arizona. There is great detail, as he used an 8x10 view camera. I see a kind of similarity between these images and Alfred Stieglitz's (#2, Jan. 2013) "Equivalents" cloud photographs; here are a link to the Stieglitz Equivalents: <https://archive.artic.edu/stieglitz/equivalents/>, and a couple of samples:



The National Gallery of Art article on Sommer also credits Edward Weston with influencing Sommer's landscape photography: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/photographs/frederick-sommer.html>

Livia, 1948.



I will end on this famous little girl portrait by Sommer. But I do not find it entirely charming. The perspective is straight on, but it appears that Livia looked up at Sommer, giving her a curious, perhaps frightened, or even ominous, look in her eyes. Do I misread this? The following commentary is from the official Sommer Foundation website:

<http://www.fredericksommer.org/>

Livia is Frederick Sommer's portrait of a young girl living in Prescott in 1948, who came to his attention through a friend, Crest Baumgartner. Lydia (her actual name) was placed on a platform, so she was eyelevel with the camera, and the found background [another one of Sommer's interests] was propped up behind her. Sommer, who was six-feet tall, recalled her looking up at him while trying to remain still for the exposure.

Also, I found two version, obviously from the same portrait session, differing only in the hand gestures. Both gestures, in a mature woman, might be gestures calling attention to the abdomen, perhaps suggesting fertility or pregnancy. Again, macabre?

Let me go a little further in my flight of analysis. Sommer renamed the real child Lydia with the photographic name Livia. Livia Drusilla (58 BCE - 29 CE) was the third wife of emperor Augustus of Rome, mother of emperor Tiberius, and grandmother of emperor Claudius. Anna Livia Plurabelle is a character in James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake*, who symbolizes the eternal and universal female. Certainly Sommer, as a man of letters, would be aware of these two namesakes of his subject. Did that influence how he composed this portrait? I can't say for sure, but Sommer's photographic compositions were very deliberate, often linking together apparently disparate elements, and the name references may be present in this image.