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Christopher O'Riley

Art Preview/**Cubic Groove** Robert Hirsch summons up the sixties

BY BRUCE ADAMS

*There's something happening here.
What it is ain't exactly clear.*

—Stephen Stills

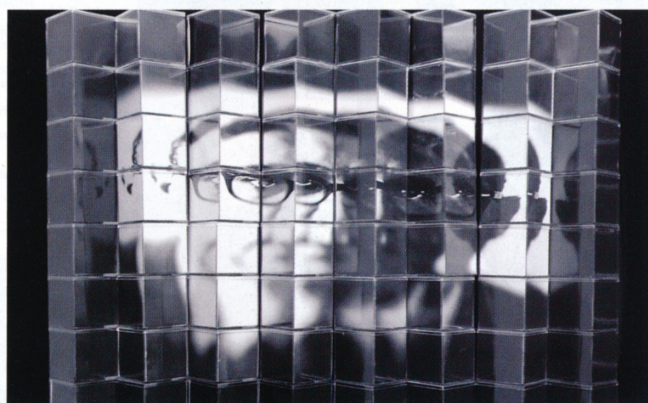
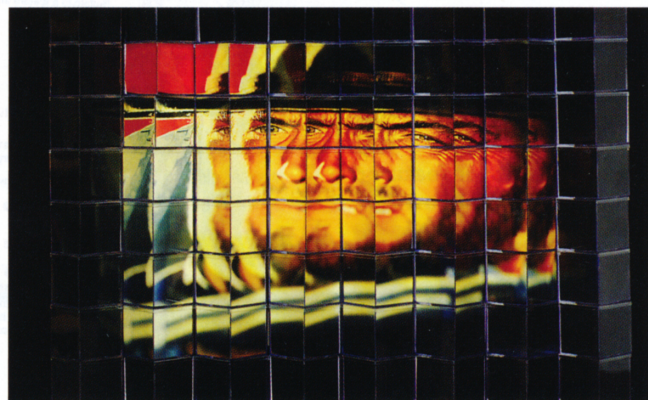
They say if you remember the sixties you weren't really there. Lucky for artist Robert Hirsch we now have Google Images to jolt our collective memories. For the past three years, Hirsch—who is a photographer, author, curator, and educator—has been researching what is arguably the most polarizing period in American history this side of the Civil War, assembling in the process a database of over 25,000 images spanning from the late fifties to the early seventies. Thousands of these images will form the basis of a major upcoming exhibition of his work titled *The 1960s: Cubed*.

The sixties certainly involved a lot of photographically memorable events, from the assassinations of John and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, to political and race riots, Charles Manson, the Beach Boys, the British invasion, hippies, yuppies, and drugs. Politically and culturally it was a time of social awakening that encompassed Kennedy's space race, the Cuban missile crisis, the Bay of Pigs, the civil rights movement, Johnson's great society, Vietnam, the consumer movement, and feminism. It's a subject so expansive that it can't be artistically contained in a single site, so Hirsch's exhibition will be presented in a unique collaboration between not-for-profit CEPA Gallery and Allentown's premier commercial venue, Indigo Gallery.

"Originally, [the exhibition] was planned for CEPA's Fluxus Main Street Gallery," says Hirsch. "However, it expanded to the point where it wouldn't fit into that space. Fortunately, Elisabeth Samuels, owner of Indigo, approached me about presenting in her gallery." Hirsch explains that the works

which will appear at Indigo were designed specifically to function within that space. They include a five-foot image-covered rotating hand forming a peace sign, and an equally tall pyramid made by stacked four-inch photo cubes—each containing multiple sixties-era images—that viewers will be able to walk through. Hirsch also has plans for a "modified" Dreamachine, a stroboscopic flicker device said to produce intense visual stimuli. The

Hirsch's work features photos of, from top, Clint Eastwood, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Henry Kissinger.



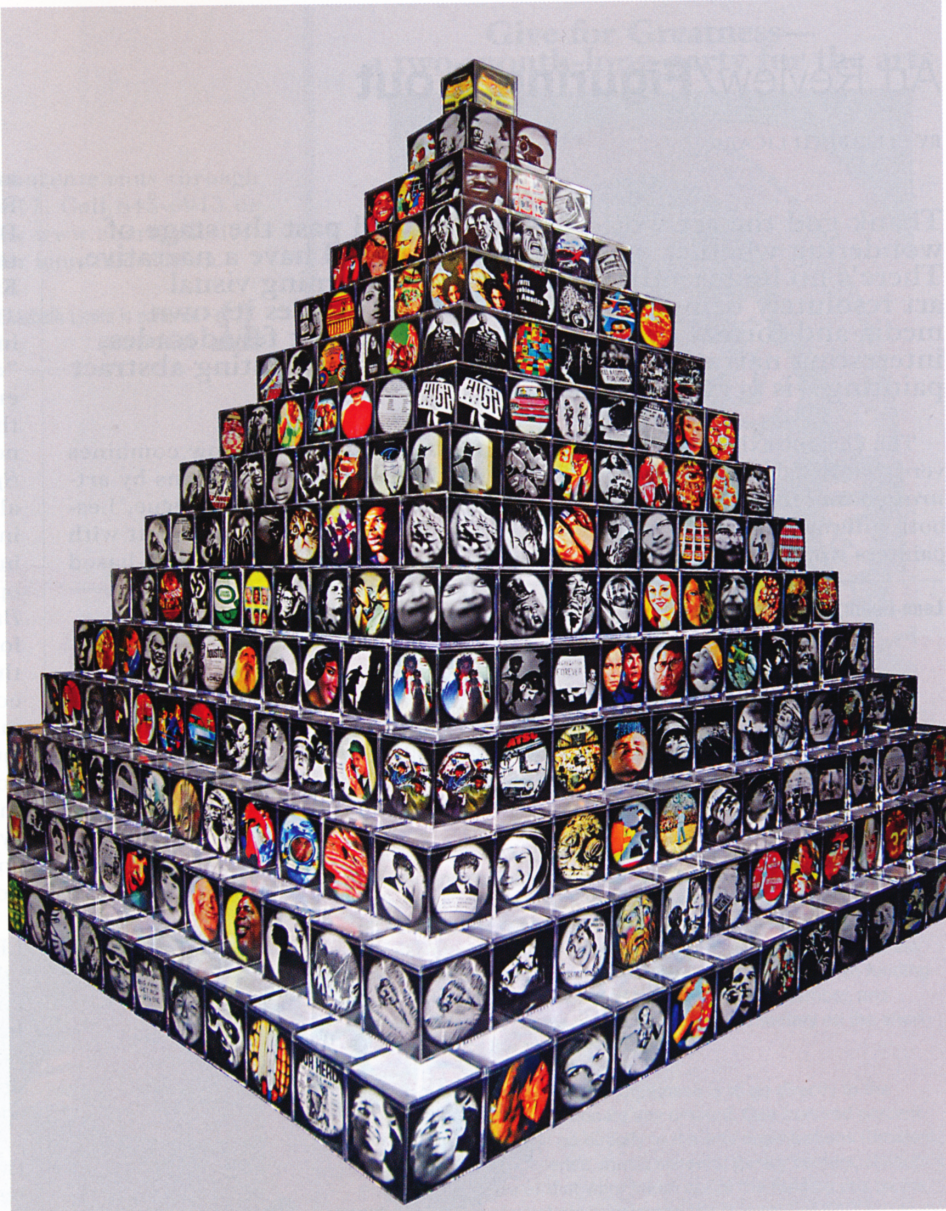
All images courtesy of the artist.

original Dreamachine was the brainchild of artist and poet Brion Gysin whose “cut-up” literary technique popularized by William S. Burroughs in the sixties can be traced back to the Dadaists and Surrealists of the early twentieth century. To complete the “happening” atmosphere, Hirsch will include a transparent mobile and psychedelic poster, along with a period-appropriate soundtrack.

Samuels believes the intimate nature of Indigo Gallery will provide a unique environment in which to become enveloped by the visually encompassing nature of the exhibition. “I’ve been intrigued by Robert Hirsch’s work for some time,” she says. “The goal of the gallery is to highlight dynamic and powerful work that embodies strength, depth, and integrity.” Just the sort of qualities Hirsch’s work exemplifies, Samuels notes, and despite the show’s groovy vibe, she contends that it will reflect intellectual rigor as well as provide a compelling visual experience. Hirsch, who teaches the history of photography at UB, says, “The project melds my involvement in image-making and history. It explores how visual media interacted with the exceptional and everyday cultural, economic, political, and scientific realms to generate a mosaic within a decade I lived through as an emerging photographer in the New York City area.”

At the core of this work—and perhaps of all Hirsch’s art in recent memory—is Gysin’s cut-up technique, which utilized the element of chance in its random rearrangement of sentence fragments. Hirsch does the same with images, many of which will be presented in those stackable photo cubes which the artist says resemble the popular Kodak Instamatic photo cubes from that time. Hirsch uses these as cell-like components to create larger structures suggesting the modular constructivism of such sixties artists as Erwin Hauer and Norman Carlberg. Except here, each cube contains a four-sided multiple of an image gleaned from various publications including *Avant Garde*, *Ebony*, *Life*, *Look*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Playboy*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Popular Science*, *Ramparts*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, and *Vogue*.

The images are modified



The working model of one part of the frustum (split) 1960s cube pyramid. This artwork will be featured at CEPA.

according to Hirsch’s particular artistic proclivities, which in this case include setting each image in a black circular vignette reminiscent of a camera lens that compositionally frames and delineates it. The images are then popped into thousands of cubes, which make up the final photo-sculptural works like the pyramid at Indigo and similar works at CEPA. What Hirsch does in the process is create a free-flowing account of a decade as seen through the images it produced, resulting

in fragmented nonlinear multiple narratives. Hirsch sees this as a metaphor for “how we live in a world of assembled fragments that unfold over time.” Of course, each time the work is mounted it results in a different random arrangement presumably evoking a multitude of spontaneous associations.

Staging a single exhibition at two venues simultaneously is not unprecedented locally; it was done as recently as last fall’s *Beyond/In* Western New York. But a joint venture between a not-for-profit and commercial gallery is virtually unheard of in town. Samuels believes the arrangement offers unique installation possibilities, as well as the opportunity to enhance exposure and build audience. Says Hirsch, “Having the opportunity to present at Indigo allows the project to reach the Allen Street audience and offer items for sale, including buttons, a poster, and an edition of prints.” Samuels explains, “Although collaboration between a not-for-profit and an independent/commercial gallery may be unusual in Buffalo, these collaborations do occur elsewhere and work to strengthen the arts community.”

Bruce Adams is an artist, writer, and educator.



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