

Peter Agostini: *Squeeze IV*, 1967, plaster, 9½ inches high; at Haverford College.

Peter Agostini at the Comfort Gallery, Haverford College

At the time of Agostini's first one-man show, in 1959, Thomas B. Hess described him as "an artist with many arrows to his bow who is working in a period that likes the monolithic shaft." That richness and variety to which Hess alluded are still apparent in this first major retrospective, which included over 40 sculptures and 75 drawings from the period 1939-74. And still, after 15 years of public scrutiny, the problem of critical reception of Agostini's work remains.

What do you do with an artist whose range is wider than the historical niches we have reserved for him? To call Agostini a Pop artist would be like calling Manet an Impressionist; to define him by the company he kept—the Abstract Expressionists—would be to set arbitrary limits of another kind on his sensibility. Agostini has always been his own man, an artist whose concern for pure esthetic values has never impeded his search for new sculptural forms or new techniques to achieve them.

Few artists can live solely by their art, and Agostini kept himself alive during his lean years as a mold-maker for other sculptors and as a mannequin-maker. Just as David Smith's experience as a working welder influenced the direction of his art, so too did Agostini's expertise with quick-setting plaster bring him to the exploration of its formal potentials. He hit upon a way of casting directly from objects which bypassed the need for modeling and emphasized the free, flowing properties of both the medium and the forms he chose. One of his strongest works is *Saracen II 1215 A.D.*, 1960. To make it, Agostini undid an old foam mattress and twisted its insides until he obtained the desired shape, cast it in plaster, knocked off those humanoid polyps superfluous to his idea, then cast it in bronze. The result bristles with combative energy and aggressive plasticity.

This retrospective confirmed Agostini as a first-rate talent and no "also-ran" in the field of modern sculpture. It was unfortunate that some of his larger pieces like *Winter Wall*, 1962, *Carousel*, 1964 and *Caged Swell*, 1967, weren't included because of space limitations. A positive aspect of the show was the number of drawings

drawings parallel the thematic and technical concerns of his sculpture. The feeling for plastic poetry found in the large bronze *Summer Breeze*, 1963, is evoked by the *Haiku* watercolors, 1967, whose forms resemble tiny bird tracks in delicate tints. The nonfigurative encaustic drawings of 1962 and the "Rorschach" watercolors of 1956 explore the idea of accidental flow and quick, unmediated action that is explicit in the plaster *Butterfly*, 1959, and *Squeeze*, 1967. Agostini's horses and human figures reveal his love of the body in all its fleshy idiosyncrasies. In both the watercolor *Seated Woman*, 1957, and the bronze *Woman with Bird*, 1971, he probes and pushes at drooping breasts and spreading thighs. The bravura of rippling muscles in his bronze horses of 1952 and '71 is strong and obvious.

This artist has never thrown his esthetic baggage overboard in the alleged interest of an unencumbered sensibility. To be linked to the past might seem to some moderns to be damned by association, yet Agostini's work compels comparison with historical definitions of the nature of sculptural form. Animating his surfaces is the same current that enlivened Bernini's cloth or Phidian drapery. But there is nothing stale about his gestures—his work reflects a fresh, witty and extremely human presence. This retrospective should serve notice to the art establishment that a sculptor can be major although he doesn't fit into its self-fulfilling prophesy of mainstream avant-garde style.

—Judith Stein

DALLAS

Sam Gummelt at Janie C. Lee

In four years of visibility, Sam Gummelt has secured his place on the roster of "star" Southwest artists. (It must be admitted, of course, that this is not a terribly crowded list.) The works on which his Texas-born-and-bred reputation is based are small, delicate objects—mostly polished plexiglass boxes containing exquisitely crafted, geometrically patterned thread-on-fabric works, and companion drawings in which diligently controlled lines and variations of value illusionistically depict woven imagery. Gummelt's work has developed slowly and carefully, realizing idea and extension and permutation. Therefore, his recent exhibition, which covered a single year's output but was complex enough to be a group show, surprised observers accustomed to his earlier, slower pace of evolution.

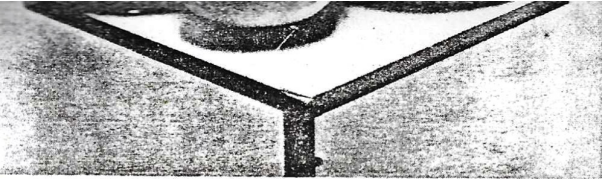
The show included 34 pieces which fell into four disparate phases. Part I contained new additions to his *Cowper Series*, an open-ended set of nonfigurative cross-hatched pastel and graphite drawings begun in 1972. Distinguishing the latest group were darker, denser, obsessively worked surfaces overlying barely discernible grids, energetic zig-zags and portly stripes which "hovered" above the paper, casting trompe-l'oeil "shadows" below. These drawings, with their regular compositions, clean edges and surfaces free of accident, don't look like "process art"; but as he

throwing, gel-scraping, latex-dripping "process" painters—how a particular medium behaves. His meticulousness and discipline didn't neutralize his investigation but the work was flawed at times by failure to discriminate between discipline and fussiness. His flashy compositions simulated shadows seemed to imply that doesn't trust the value of the drawing activity itself.

Part II included 10 12-by-13-inch photo engravings of illustrations from an old geometry text—*A Sphere, A Cube* and so on. Gummelt enlarged the plates and reworked them slightly, deepening darks and lightening other areas. There were also 11 large pencil drawings of the same subjects. The contrast between the solid, weighty chunkiness of the prints and the scribbled, smudged and erased looseness of the drawing was mildly interesting, although general inspiration seemed elementary and banal, like an exercise assigned in a still-course.

Part III comprised five wooden relief pieces intended perhaps to stretch Gummelt's successful "woven" imagery a little further. Such an intention is popularly approved these days: witness the current bull market in translations into the print mediums of painters or sculptors of works in other mediums. But unfortunately, intent doth not make successful artwork make. The interwoven slats of the relief pieces, when spotlighted, cast shadows on the rear planes of the constructions, from which the slats were distanced by pegs. This effect was conceived as a concrete equivalent to the illusion of shadows of the *Cowper Series*, but because the real shadows were so predictable, the visually capitulated to the woodwork. An additional punch was supposed to derive from the fact that neither glue nor nails nor screws—nor magic—held the elements together; rather, it was the tension of the slats interlacing that prevented collapse. A similar principle made Serra's *One Ton Piece* (House of Cards) a winner; but at Gummelt's 2-by-2-foot scale, Serra's threat of doom were absent. The sterile gentility of these pieces was further reinforced by the satin finish and pristine self-contained frames—they looked like Chinese puzzles dressed for the Beaux-Arts Ball.

Part IV consisted of a single, 17-foot-long wall piece made of erratically ruled tarpaper studded with aluminum discs, called *Isis*. This material was stapled over an imposing grid of wooden two-by-four which extended several inches beyond the tarpaper edges. The rough, transient feel and commanding presence of this piece were decidedly out of sync with Gummelt's "precious-object" sensibility. *Isis*' worthiness was the deliberate highlighting of the shiny discs, which was meant to dramatize the piece's kinship to the reflective graphite skin of the *Cowper Series* drawings; but, instead, the result suggested that starry ceilings one finds in airport bars. It was so obviously a footnote to the show—the first, tentative step towards larger scale and new materials—that its inclusion in the particular grouping was startling. The piece would have been vigorous and impressive



Peter Agostini: *Squeeze IV*, 1967, plaster, 9½ inches high; at Haverford College.

Peter Agostini at the Comfort Gallery, Haverford College

At the time of Agostini's first one-man show, in 1959, Thomas B. Hess described him as "an artist with many arrows to his bow who is working in a period that likes the monolithic shaft." That richness and variety to which Hess alluded are still apparent in this first major retrospective, which included over 40 sculptures and 75 drawings from the period 1939-74. And still, after 15 years of public scrutiny, the problem of critical reception of Agostini's work remains.

What do you do with an artist whose range is wider than the historical niches we have reserved for him? To call Agostini a Pop artist would be like calling Manet an Impressionist; to define him by the company he kept—the Abstract Expressionists—would be to set arbitrary limits of another kind on his sensibility. Agostini has always been his own man, an artist whose concern for pure esthetic values has never impeded his search for new sculptural forms or new techniques to achieve them.

Few artists can live solely by their art, and Agostini kept himself alive during his lean years as a mold-maker for other sculptors and as a mannequin-maker. Just as David Smith's experience as a working welder influenced the direction of his art, so too did Agostini's expertise with quick-setting plaster bring him to the exploration of its formal potentials. He hit upon a way of casting directly from objects which bypassed the need for modeling and emphasized the free, flowing properties of both the medium and the forms he chose. One of his strongest works is *Saracen II 1215 A.D.*, 1960. To make it, Agostini undid an old foam mattress and twisted its insides until he obtained the desired shape, cast it in plaster, knocked off those humanoid polyps superfluous to his idea, then cast it in bronze. The result bristles with combative energy and aggressive plasticity.

This retrospective confirmed Agostini as a first-rate talent and no "also-ran" in the field of modern sculpture. It was unfortunate that some of his larger pieces like *Winter Wall*, 1962, *Carousel*, 1964 and *Caged Swell*, 1967, weren't included because of space limitations. A positive aspect of the show was the number of drawings, watercolors and monoprints; these have rarely been exhibited. Agostini has said that he draws "to keep his eye alive." Representing more than notational sketches, his

the plaster *Butterfly*, 1959, and *Squeeze*, 1967. Agostini's horses and human figures reveal his love of the body in all its fleshy idiosyncrasies. In both the watercolor *Seated Woman*, 1957, and the bronze *Woman with Bird*, 1971, he probes and pushes at drooping breasts and spreading thighs. The bravura of rippling muscles in his bronze horses of 1952 and '71 is strong and obvious.

This artist has never thrown his esthetic baggage overboard in the alleged interest of an unencumbered sensibility. To be linked to the past might seem to some moderns to be damned by association, yet Agostini's work compels comparison with historical definitions of the nature of sculptural form. Animating his surfaces is the same current that enlivened Bernini's cloth or Phidian drapery. But there is nothing stale about his gestures—his work reflects a fresh, witty and extremely human presence. This retrospective should serve notice to the art establishment that a sculptor can be major although he doesn't fit into its self-fulfilling prophesy of mainstream avant-garde style.

—Judith Stein

DALLAS

Sam Gummelt at Janie C. Lee

In four years of visibility, Sam Gummelt has secured his place on the roster of "star" Southwest artists. (It must be admitted, of course, that this is not a terribly crowded list.) The works on which his Texas-born-and-bred reputation is based are small, delicate objects—mostly polished plexiglass boxes containing exquisitely crafted, geometrically patterned thread-on-fabric works, and companion drawings in which diligently controlled lines and variations of value illusionistically depict woven imagery. Gummelt's work has developed slowly and carefully, realizing idea and extension and permutation. Therefore, his recent exhibition, which covered a single year's output but was complex enough to be a group show, surprised observers accustomed to his earlier, slower pace of evolution.

The show included 34 pieces which fell into four disparate phases. Part I contained new additions to his *Cowper Series*, an open-ended set of nonfigurative cross-hatched pastel and graphite drawings begun in 1972. Distinguishing the latest group were darker, denser, obsessively worked surfaces overlying barely discernible grids, energetic zig-zags and portly stripes which "hovered" above the paper, casting trompe-l'oeil "shadows" below. These drawings, with their regular compositions, clean edges and surfaces free of accident, don't look like "process art"; but as he

Part II included 10 12-by-13-inch engravings of illustrations from an old ometry text—*A Sphere*, *A Cube* and so Gummelt enlarged the plates and reworked them slightly, deepening darks and lightening other areas. There were also 11 large pencil drawings of the same subjects, in contrast between the solid, weighty chunkiness of the prints and the scribbled, smudged and erased looseness of the drawing was mildly interesting, although general inspiration seemed elementary banal, like an exercise assigned in a still-course.

Part III comprised five wooden relief intended perhaps to stretch Gummelt's successful "woven" imagery a little further. Such an intention is popularly appropriate these days: witness the current bull market in translations into the print mediums of painters or sculptors of works in other mediums. But unfortunately, intent doth not make successful artwork make. The interwoven slats of the relief pieces, when spotlighted, cast shadows on the rear planes of the constructions, from which the slats were distanced by pegs. This effect was conceived as a concrete equivalent to the illusion of shadows of the *Cowper Series*, but because the real shadows were so predictable, the visually capitulated to the woodwork. An additional punch was supposed to derive from the fact that neither glue nor nails nor screws—nor magic—held the elements together; rather, it was the tension of the slats interlacings that prevented collapse. A similar principle made Serra's *One Ton Piece* (*House of Cards*) a winner; but at Gummelt's 2-by-2-foot scale, Serra's threat of oomph were absent. The sterile gentility of these pieces was further reinforced by their satin finish and pristine self-contained frames—they looked like Chinese puzzle-dressed for the Beaux-Arts Ball.

Part IV consisted of a single, 17-foot-long wall piece made of erratically run tarpaper studded with aluminum discs, called *Isis*. This material was stapled to an imposing grid of wooden two-by-four which extended several inches beyond the tarpaper edges. The rough, transient feel and commanding presence of this piece were decidedly out of sync with Gummelt's "precious-object" sensibility. *Isis*' vulnerability was the deliberate highlighting of the shiny discs, which was meant to dramatize the piece's kinship to the reflective graphite skin of the *Cowper Series* drawings; but, instead, the result suggested starry ceilings one finds in airport bars. It was so obviously a footnote to the show's first, tentative step towards larger scale and new materials—that its inclusion in the particular grouping was startling. The piece would have been vigorous and impos-

Art in America
July 1974