Frederick Sommer's work has earned its place in the art of this century, but the exact nature of the work and the place it should occupy are still debated. Sommer is usually identified in terms of one or another group of images, and meanings are associated with specific bodies of work: the desert landscapes suggest one set of interpretations, the collages and constructions point to a personal mythology, the images of amputation or death are seen as apocalyptic, and the smoke on glass, paint on cellophane, and cut paper abstractions appear to reference other forms and media. Each group elicits strong feelings of admiration or antipathy, and these feelings apparently confirm the validity of a thematic approach to the work; but this approach falls short if the goal is an integrated understanding of the various forms Sommer has explored. A lack of broad comprehension of Sommer's imagery is the result, despite the respect this imagery is accorded.

The structure of Sommer: Words / Images, published in 1984 by the Center for Creative Photography, provides a guide to how Sommer himself wants his work considered. The book has the nature of a testament, since it appeared shortly before Sommer's eightieth birthday; and Sommer's involvement with its form is made clear by James Enyeart's introductory statement: "This two-volume set of works of art and writings by Frederick Sommer is the first of a number of books to be published by the Center for Creative Photography that are devoted to an artist's integral participation in the content and design. These books reinforce the concept that books as visual instruments can be as meaningful as conventional monographs and that by allowing artists to speak directly through a book format of their own creation, we learn more than is printed on the page."

Images contains seventy-nine reproductions of photographs, musical scores, and drawings made between 1939 and 1981; it represents well the many facets of Sommer's visual work and can be considered a summation of the visual ideas that have so occupied him for four decades. The work is not sequenced according to chronology or category, except for the musical scores and drawings which are placed together at the book's end. Emphasized instead are visual linkages across open pages and correlations between the work in Images and the ideas in Words; cross-relationships are established that suggest different ways of thinking about Sommer.

The placement and order of the reproductions leads to the inference that Sommer's work is fundamentally concerned with structure, movement, line and form; the meaning of tone value, texture and spatial reference; and the actual experience of completely attentive looking. It is true that the desert landscapes are literal and the collages symbolic, with references to myth and literature; it is equally true that the constructed images are surrealist and the cut paper works are examinations of action (making), and contemplation (looking). Influences of cubism, futurism, dada and surrealism can be traced in the work, as can the results of Sommer's study of architecture, music and literature. But more important are basic ideas about art that transcend subject matter, theme, or points of reference.

The emphasis on these basic ideas is felt everywhere. Paracelsus is the first plate: much of the impact of this famous image is derived from the broad, sweeping eye movements it requires of the viewer. In order to fully see the image, the eyes must
move; there is no final visual or formal resolution, despite the fact that tone values can eventually be integrated, scale references inferred, and anthropomorphic or symbolic meanings can be mentally apprehended and worked through to the point of some intellectual conclusion. (If the title is taken as nominative, we form ideas about the historical figure of this alchemist physician, and we read the "figure" as torso, effigy, monument, specimen, or apparition.) This is conveyed with exquisite attention to formal balance, and framed by a rectangle that is never breached. But even after we have stopped imagining meanings, the image continues to move.

Linear rhythms in four Cut Paper abstractions (Plates 4 and 5, 64 and 65) completely dominate both first impressions and memory traces of these works; only after extended contemplation do these rhythms fully merge with formal, textural and spatial elements. Meanings and figurations suggest themselves once the abstractions are visually resolved, but they are determined by visual aspects and perceptual responses. Such responses are independent of subject matter: for example, both Coyotes and Colorado River Landscape are paired with drawings on foil (Plates 10 and 11, 54 and 55). The point is not to jar or force a suspension of disbelief, but to emphasize the fact that certain linear and tonal elements are shared by these images, sometimes in startling ways.

Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John is placed opposite a cut paper abstraction from 1971. At first glance one image is narrative, mythic and symbolic, the other abstract, linear and textural; yet in fact they are organized in ways that are remarkably alike (Plates 38 and 39). A nude (untitled) is paired with a study of chicken parts (Plates 60 and 61), and the meaning of each image is radically altered by the recognition of similar visual elements, placed in similar positions. Apparently simple echoes of shape and texture between Untitled (Wood and Violin) and Ondine (Plates 36 and 37) change the ways each image is seen, in particular the sense of actual size as opposed to implied scale; and the same observations can be made about The Thief Greater Than His Loot and Chicken (Plates 52 and 53). The chicken head becomes massive and monumental, the thief diminutive; compare its juxtaposition (in its cropped version) with Moon Culmination in an earlier publication, Frederick Sommer at Seventy-Five. The layerings and textures which are so carefully stated in each image shift in relation to each other; the thief seems less alive and invincible, the chicken more dead and final.

Other expressive possibilities are explored. The well-known image of Max Ernst is placed opposite Arizona Landscape (Plates 14 and 15). The conjunction appears simple, but it operates on many levels. The textural fineness of the double-image portrait is subtly augmented by textures in the desert landscape. The photograph of Ernst is commanding yet enigmatic, difficult to resolve; the desert landscape, like all of Sommer's finest works of this kind, is actually impossible to resolve in any traditional sense. Intense looking at the Ernst image brings heightened awareness of the psychic energy it contains, and the same kind of looking into the desert landscape brings increased perception of an almost wild textural energy. Similar textures function as carriers of similar symbolic or psychic charges in many pairs of images, and these pairings seem always to stress the interrelatedness of all kinds of subject matter.

In Plates 30 and 31 The Furies is sequenced with an untitled photograph of the remains of a horse. The images fall together so naturally they appear in strange visual harmony despite obvious discord in content and approach. Medallion is placed next to an untitled, rock-strewn landscape (Plates 40 and 41); the eyes pass
over each photograph with astonishing ease. Seen by itself, Medallion demands interpretation and analysis of content, as it treads a careful line between grotesquerie and innocence. The all-seeing doll’s head, at the center of the image, has some of the power of a Tibetan Buddhist image of Mahakala, yet the cracked paint and crazed, decaying veneer in the rest of the image cause the photograph to implode, structurally and thematically: the power is an illusion, the doll is a dead thing, the process of aging and the passage of time are absolute. Nature splits everything open. Seen together with the landscape, Medallion is reconciled, through an interesting kind of textural unity, with a more harmonious view of existence: nature breaks rocks the way it cracks paint and surface. The processes are related, the textures are the same, the inevitable is part of a vast geologic necessity; the passage of time brings metamorphosis as well as destruction. Cracking and peeling textures relate Orminda (Plate 50) and Dugas (Plate 51) in like fashion, perhaps more obviously – what time does to the image of beauty, it also does to the surface of wood; the textures and results are again the same, and the harshness of inevitability is lessened by this sameness.

At times relationships created or augmented by the sequencing in Images can involve visual nodal points (Valise d’Adan and Taylor, Arizona; Young Explorer II and Cut Paper, 1970; Plates 12 and 13, 42 and 43), or similar positionings of the primary visual intersections in each image. Some images are paired for reasons that need no investigation, and in some cases the pairings do not work well. An image like Moon Culmination really stands best alone: here it is seen in uneasy relationship with a landscape. The Giant, a monstrous image of machine worship, fetishism, hubris and destruction, seems less forceful alongside I Adore You; the biting satire of the latter image lessens the monumentality of the former (compare its impact opposite the first page of John Weiss’ essay in Venus, Jupiter & Mars.) And not all of the work in Images is equally strong. Some of the drawings lack the force and direction of Sommer’s best imagery, and the soft-focus nudes seem almost peculiar relative to the assertive crispness that is usually so integral to Sommer’s vision.

There are other examples, but in general the sequencing of this book is remarkable, and one point should be clear: Sommer’s work needs to be seen as representing a coherent set of visual ideas, not as a collection of separate explorations related internally by theme. These visual ideas are rooted in a philosophical concern with logic and structure, which Sommer considers essential to meaning in all forms of art. These ideas also reflect a practical concern with photographic materials, which readily accept any input that modulates light and which, ultimately, differentiate by tone value rather than subject matter. The mythic and the real, the abstract and the specific are all related here, both by approach and the use of the medium, and this relationship helps diffuse the symbolic complexity of certain images, making both meaning and context more accessible.

The Words volume contains most of Sommer’s major theoretical statements, and without it, Images could be seen (by one so inclined) as a retrospective whose content was assembled according to the dictates of some personal structural determinism, with musical scores and drawings awkwardly appended, for completeness, at the end. But the sharing of visual elements between the scores, drawings and various components of the photographic work is not arbitrary. In the essay Art and Aesthetics Sommer makes several points that emphasize this:

Photographers have to be educated to consider photography in the light of the
history of art and the history of ideas. Images and ideas cannot function separately.

We owe much to our sources and should not be afraid to borrow. What we learn from a work of art is renewed in the future. The right to this exchange is earned by dedication.... Every time we see a beautiful work of art we acquire some of its rigor. In going to museums, a painter remembers many paintings in terms of the structural cohesion of their component parts. So after years of work he ends up with a creative combination of these sources. This is not bad.

People still do not think of photography enough in terms of design. In fact, they shirk the need to do so. They believe there is a significant difference between painting or sculpture, and photography where you have to accept a given set of circumstances. But one needs to be a designer in any of the arts; design is the ordering of our feelings.

(The) capacity to reorder and transform what we learn is the creative process.

These strongly-felt and well-argued – and basically reasonable and simple – ideas are hardly a self-justifying manifesto written by a cranky surrealist who likes to put different-seeming work together for obscure and private reasons. Sommer may or may not be important as a maker of musical scores and drawings, but he is without dispute important as a photographer who believes in the inter-relatedness of all forms of artistic expression, and who goes to some lengths to express this belief. If one takes him seriously, relationships that are perceived between different photographic images can be carried over into visual examination of non-photographic work and imagery, and eventually the barriers to understanding the scores and drawings fall away: we see they are not intended as separate artistic phenomena, and that they bear evidence of design and structural relationship in the same ways as the photographs.

Some of Sommer's ideas are compressed into the minimum number of words that will express them; this is the case in both Poetry and Logic and The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics:

Art and nature are not arbitrary.

Mathematics structures
the pictorial logic of nature.

Algebra is to mathematics
what aesthetics is to pictorial logic.

Aesthetics is concerned with
the variables of display within nature.

Position is the prime element of form and from position
are derived all aspects of structure and form.

Elegance of form is the product of elegance of choice
within specific limitations.

Quantitative and qualitative choice of positions in space
and choice of occupiers for those positions
define the logic of form.

Position and occupier build structure and content. Structure and content together constitute form.

In a generalized condition of space, the sum of all occupiable positions is the potential for creation.

Sommer claims that photography is truly an interdisciplinary concern, no different from the other arts in either its creative potential or transformative capacity. He emphasizes that the creative process is not arbitrary, but dependent on a kind of pictorial logic that is related to natural and mathematical principles; that this logic can be elegantly used; and that subject matter per se is not at all the issue. He proves this point by demonstrating relationships between images that have no subject connection, and only asks that we examine the totality of his work in the context of these ideas. His statements, which need to be read as carefully as the photographs, point continually away from simple thematic analysis as a basis for the understanding of art, and just as continually toward a more comprehensive understanding of the creative process. If "the sum of all occupiable positions / is the potential for creation", art is therefore a process of relating oneself to the natural laws that govern existence and determine the connections between phenomena; as such it requires, on same level, an understanding of the quantitative aspects of nature and aesthetics, structure and form.

Sommer says this less formally in A Talk Given at the Art Institute of Chicago (October, 1970, revised June, 1983):

I have seen more and more how photography brings images to sensitized surfaces, and I an interested in sensitized surfaces... it is with (these), rather than with photography itself, that I am concerned.

In the making of an image, the commitment is to the coherence and development of the first moves. It takes strength to respect what things want to do and imaginatively graft on a few departures.... I hope I am presenting this in terms of something that is not arbitrary. There is nothing in art that is arbitrary, as there is nothing in science that is arbitrary.

General Aesthetics, although more formal, contains much the same message:

Art is not arbitrary. A fine painting ... is not arrived at by chance.... Things that we would say before the fact have absolutely nothing in common still have a mathematical chance to meet and work together. The cohesion in Moon Culmination is the coming together of two things that are unknown to each other....

Logic makes it possible to structure what we admire of the past and to understand what is happening in the present. Art takes us from logic to aesthetics.

The creating of relationships between similar or dissimilar elements which is one of the most striking features of Sommer's work is, therefore, not in the least accidental. These relationships are worthy of the most careful study – of every element, at every level – for only in this way does the meaning became clear. Subject, as an end in itself, concerns Sommer hardly at all, and sometimes he even
pokes fun at it: "Venus, Jupiter and Mars is called that simply because it is not exactly Venus Jupiter and Mars.... We have to leave a little room for poetic logic."

In the final analysis the work presented in Sommer: Words / Images is not just about photography or genre but about seeing, and is an investigation into the nature of all phenomena. These unusual images are not available just to the initiated; they ultimately deal with the ways we understand existence and occurrence. Sommer is trying to transcend themes and perceptions in the usual sense, to re-examine vision and expression as conventionally defined, to re-work mythology to fit the space created by the camera image, and to expand the limits of the medium he uses so well. In this sense, Words / Images is as carefully layered as any of Sommer’s finest photographs, and as a work of art it merits the same attention.

Portions of this essay were adopted for the published article which appeared in Photo Communique, Summer 1985.