



Allan McCollum, *Perpetual Photo*, 1982-90, Sepia-tone black-and-white photograph, 45" x 60" x 3 framed. From the series "Perpetual Photos," 1982--.

ALLAN McCOLLUM

FRIEDRICH PETZEL,
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Allan McCollum once asserted that a typical viewer's relationship to a work of art is predicated on the desire "to be involved in the Primal Scene, not out in the hall looking through the keyhole." It is, however, precisely out in the metaphoric hall that McCollum has established an outpost, basing his oeuvre on the ways in which fantasies of immersion play themselves out in the fetishistic production, circulation, and consumption of art and other symbolic objects. His best-known series, the "Surrogate Paintings," from 1978, and the related "Plaster Surrogates," began in 1982, made this point explicit, rendering a generic idea of "painting" as so many interchangeable props: theatrical effects designed to represent representation while unmasking those scripts that determine the cultural significance of things.

McCollum's most recent exhibition also marked an insistence on the play between raptness and remove, pairing a number of his "Per-

petual Photos" (begun in 1982) with "The Recognizable Image Drawings" executed just a year ago. The earlier series comprises large black-and-white and sepia-tone photographs that, at a glance, walk a fine line between figuration and abstraction, mimicking the indiscriminate contours of Rorschach inkblots. Yet the difficulty in reading these images owes less to any inherent formal opacity than a kind of counter-intuitive distancing effect. It is as though the eye has been pressed too close to the object it wants to see. And, indeed, it was precisely this desire to get nearer to images as they stubbornly recede that propelled the "Perpetual Photos." Noting the ubiquity of indecipherable framed "art" images that appeared as props in television programs, McCollum began snapping shots of them directly from the screen. The artist then blew-up these highly suggestive—if hard-to-discern—images and framed them, pasting the original shots on the back as slippery evidence of their original context.

In one famous rumination on the tube, "Television: Set and Screen" (1996), Samuel Weber re-

minds us that the word *television*, literally rendered, means "seeing at a distance" or, better, "farsightedness." And while the "Perpetual Photos" were his only works based on TV per se, such a concept neatly describes nearly all of McCollum's methods, which hover deliciously between sharp institutional critique and melancholy visual poetics. "The Recognizable Image Drawings," for instance, can also be seen in this light, even while the artist initially appears to have panned out (rather than zoomed in) to make the work.

The drawings were part of *The Kansas and Missouri Topographical Model Donation Project*, 2003, for which McCollum produced and donated plaster topographical relief models of Kansas and Missouri to some 120 historical societies in those states. The recipients were invited to paint, decorate, and display the models however they saw fit—many recruited local artists or hobbyist groups to take part. An additional aspect of the project was borne out in a series of 220 small graphic drawings, each detailing the contours of another discrete geometric shape. If, as the title suggests, these shapes were meant to be instantly "recognizable," however, they would be so only to a very select audience. Each schematic drawing depicted a different county in Kansas or Missouri, eliciting identification in its inhabitants (past and present) but a curious emptiness in the rest of us. Yet here, as in the "Perpetual Photos" of twenty years before, what McCollum evinced was a certain farsightedness, a productively thwarted *desire* to recognize more than recognition itself—in other words, the view through the keyhole.

— Johanna Burton