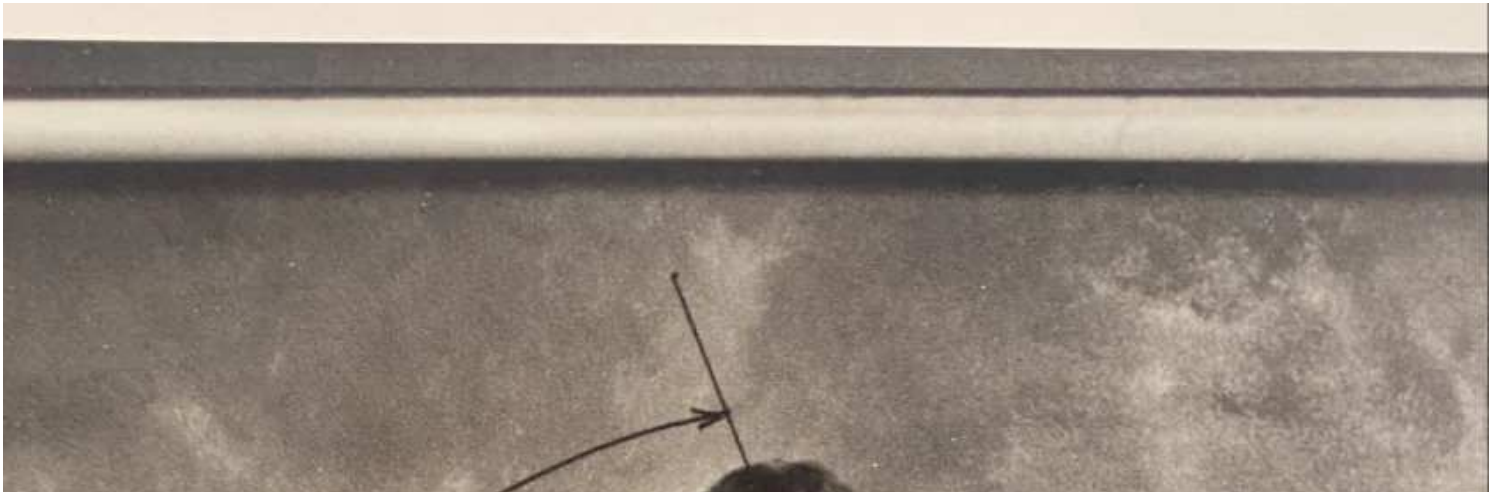


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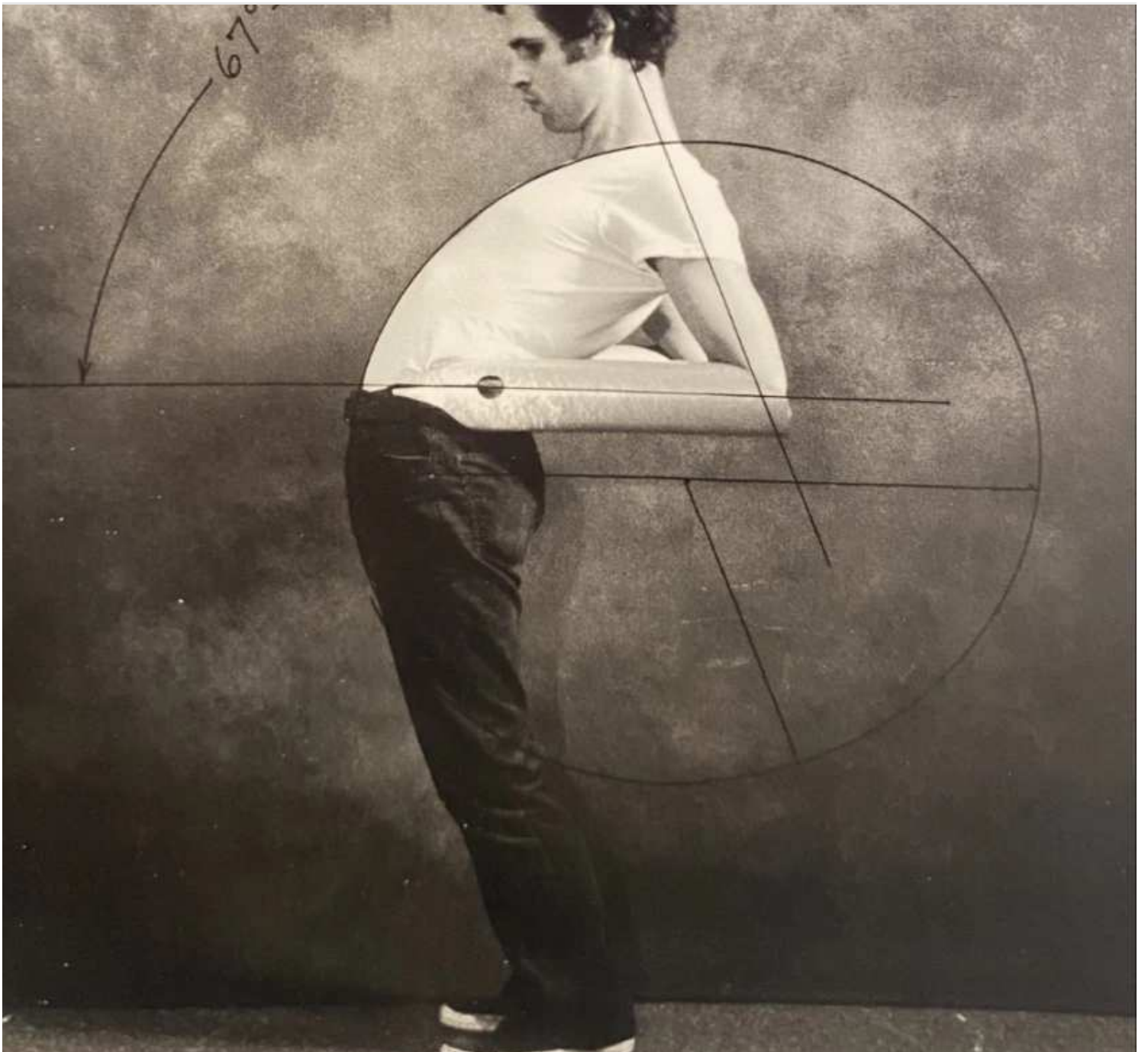
ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS


# Robert Cumming, whose photographs transformed camera work, dies at 78



Los Angeles Times

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Artist Robert Cumming often used himself as the subject of his witty photographs, as in “67-degree body arc off circle center” (1975). (Robert Cumming, courtesy Janet Borden Inc.)

BY CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | ART CRITIC

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Robert Cumming, an artist best known for Conceptual photographs that were instrumental in a major transformation of camera work in the 1970s and early ‘80s, died Dec. 16 in Desert Hot Springs, Calif. He was 78.

According to his life partner, Margaret Irwin-Brandon, Cumming died from complications of Parkinson’s disease.

Cumming worked primarily in black-and-white, the established format employed to distinguish photography as serious art rather than an element of commercial mass media, which favored color. He often made large-format contact prints, emphasizing a commitment to directness and honesty over preciousness and darkroom manipulation. But he discarded the usual sober, documentary pose of Modernist art photography, preferring instead to throw a monkey wrench into the visual mix.

Typical was “[Ansel Adams Raisin Bread](#)” (1973), a diptych with a quirky reference to Adams, the reigning king of glamorous, ostensibly straightforward landscape photography. A store-bought loaf of packaged bread, some individual slices, several plates and a box of raisins featuring a sunny picture of a young woman in a field holding a platter of fruit are casually arranged atop a table, which is set up outdoors in a garden patio.

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The picture is devoid of any artful composition or lighting. A second photograph in the pair is virtually identical — except this time each bread slice is conspicuously dotted with a few dozen raisins. The bread is an echo of the tabletop, a flat plane on which ordinary objects have been placed. Human intervention in the scene is inescapable. Photographic truth is underscored, all the while made absurd.

Critic Andy Grundberg once noted of his photographs, “Cummings nearly pulls the wool over our eyes. But he is never interested in true deception, only the appearance of it, and he gives away his sleight of hand in every piece.”

With his friend and sometime studio-mate William Wegman, who started out making videos but eventually moved into still photographs centered on his soulful Weimaraner, Man Ray, Cumming was among the first Conceptually influenced photographers to enjoy early success. The new genre of camera work was sometimes exhibited under the umbrella “fabricated to be photographed,” which acknowledged the degree to which all photographs inescapably incorporate a fictional, manufactured element.

Sometimes Cumming used his own body as an eccentric subject, as in “67-degree body arc off circle center” from 1975. Shown in profile with his hips thrust forward, his torso arched back and his neck and head awkwardly aligned with the angle of his legs, he’s a mathematical or scientific demonstration whose geometry turns the graceful rationality of Leonardo da Vinci’s [“Vitruvian Man”](#) on its ear. The title’s geometric forms drawn around his body on the surface of the photograph might have been made with an oversized pen-nib, into which the hand on Cumming’s hip is discreetly hidden.

The artist’s photograph, like a drawing, is an artifice.

His work as a painter, sculptor and performance artist informed his distinctive, often witty approach to images made with a camera, which Cumming began to explore in 1969 and continued for more than a decade. Artists as diverse as Eve Sonneman, Jan Groover, Lew Thomas, Judy Fiskin and Lewis Baltz were blurring traditional boundaries in different but Conceptually cogent ways. Photography would never be the same.

Cumming was born in 1943 in Worcester, Mass., a once vigorous industrial city on the wane after World War II. He earned a bachelor's degree in 1965 at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and an MFA in 1967 at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, both in painting. After an initial teaching job at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, where he began the transition into camera work, he was hired in 1970 at Cal State Fullerton.

Cumming's first major group show was "24 Young Los Angeles Artists" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1971. Two years later, when he was 30, his first solo exhibition of photographs opened at Cal State Long Beach. A 1986 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He exhibited widely.

Cumming received National Endowment for the Arts grants in photography (1973), the experimental category of "new genres" (1974) and printmaking (1983), as well as a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in 1980-81. Thirty-three of his photographs are in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum; his work also is represented in the Whitney, SFMOMA and New York's Museum of Modern Art.

In 1978 Cumming returned to New England to teach at Connecticut's Hartford Art School, one of the nation's oldest art schools, later establishing his studio in the small town of Whately in Western Massachusetts.

He met Irwin-Brandon, a professor of European Baroque music at Mount Holyoke College, in 1988. The couple moved to Desert Hot Springs in 2013. In addition to Irwin-

Brandon, Cumming is survived by a sister, Virginia, and a brother, Edward.

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