University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications

Sheldon Museum of Art

1-1-1995

Dislocated Emblems: Recent Work by Warren Rosser

Daphne A. Deeds
Chief Curator at Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska- Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs

Part of the Art and Design Commons

Deeds, Daphne A., "Dislocated Emblems: Recent Work by Warren Rosser" (1995). *Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications.* Paper 24.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs/24

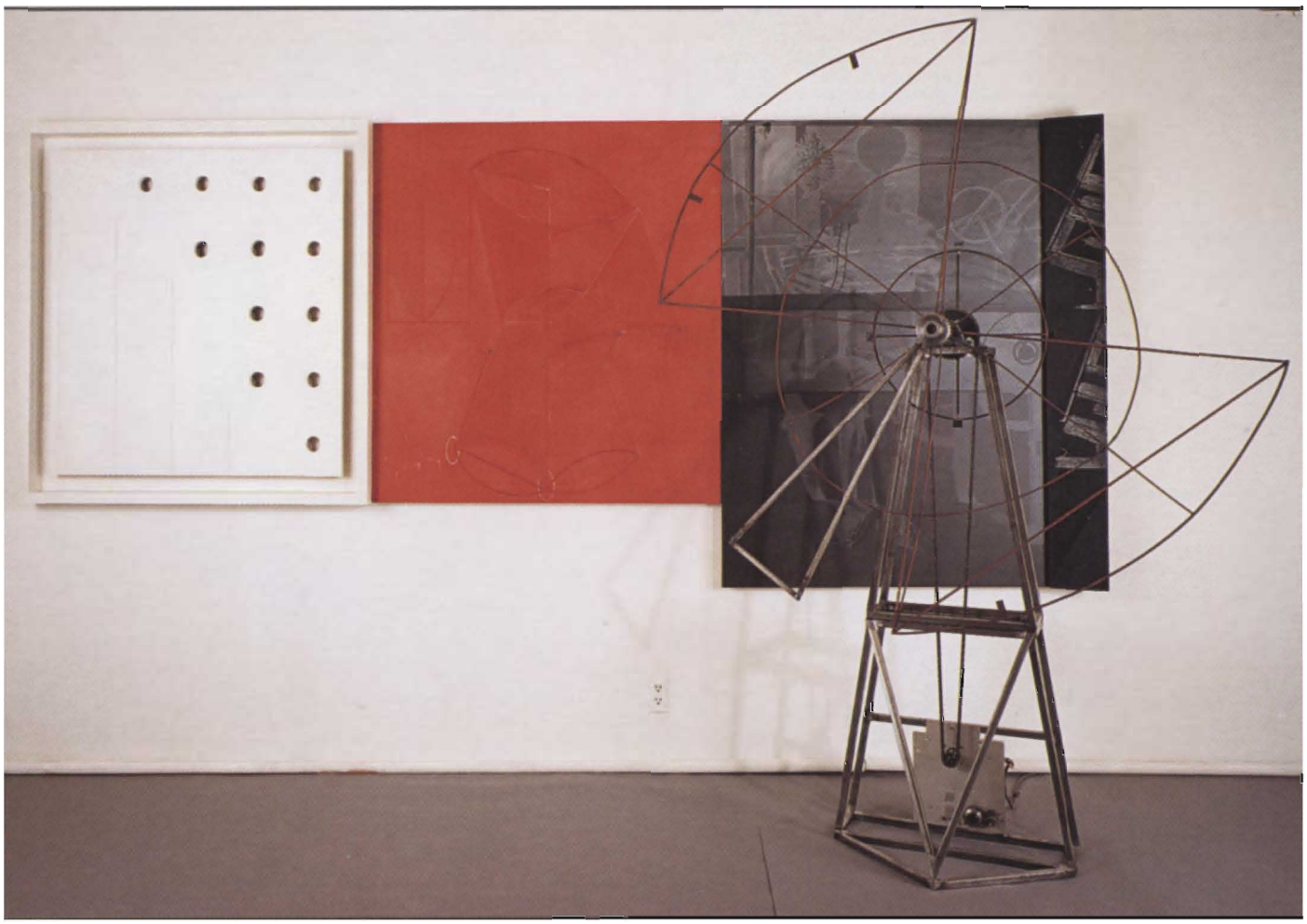
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sheldon Museum of Art at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

S H E L D O N

SOLO

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

Dislocated Emblems



Recent Work by

Warren Rosser

September 7 - November 26, 1995

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

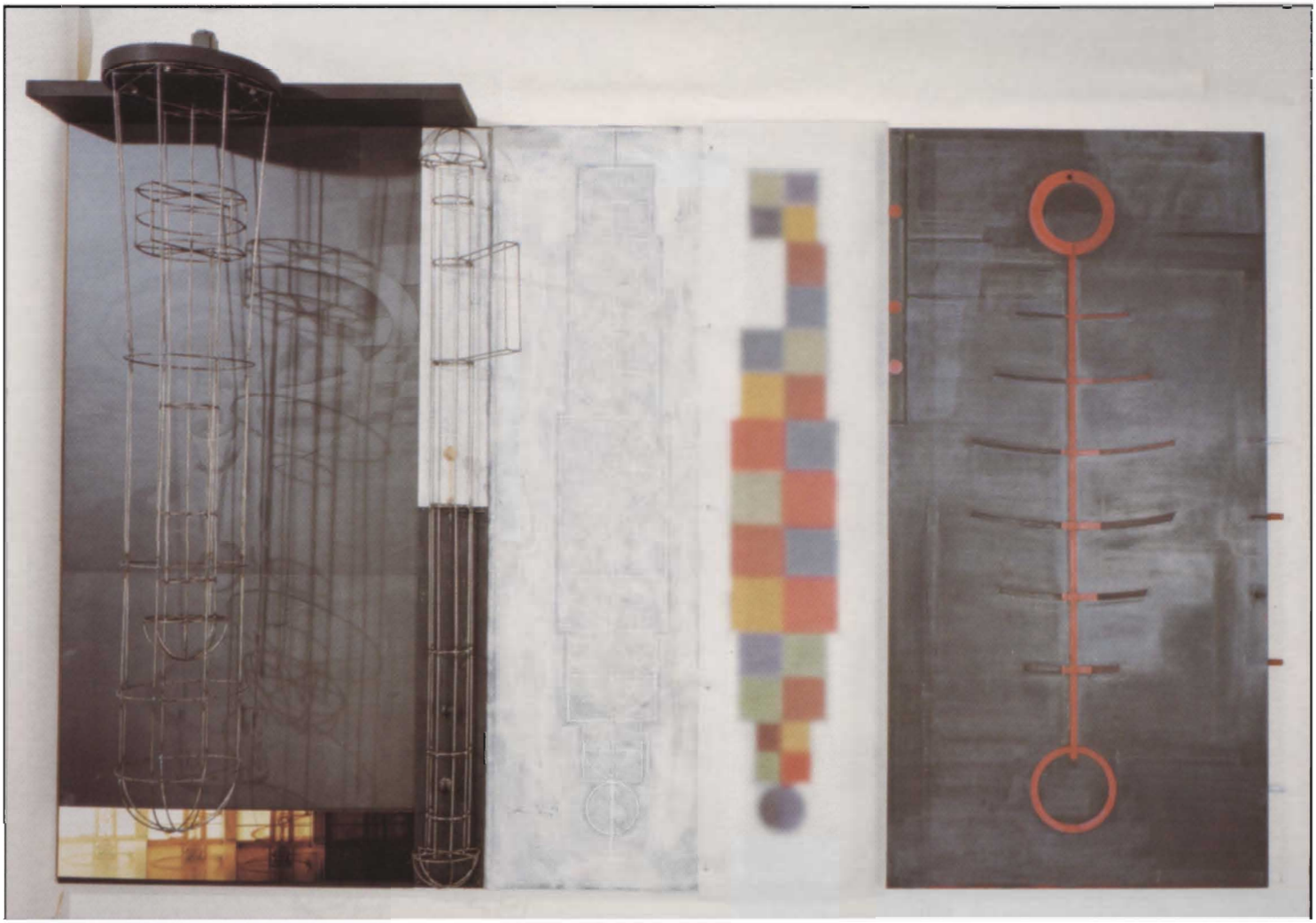
Though emerging artists often dazzle us with brash or daring work, the artist at mid-career has reached a level of consistency and retrospection that delivers the work from facile solutions. With a career that now spans more than twenty-five years, Warren Rosser's work has evolved into the kind of subtle dialogue between carefully honed technique and highly articulated personal vocabulary that is achieved only with the diligence and insight of maturity. "Dislocated Emblems" is a watershed of Rosser's long commitment to his art. These new works are the culmination of an intensely productive year when Rosser's aesthetic, philosophical, and emotional concerns converged, resulting in multi-media constructions that are both visually and intellectually compelling.

Schooled as a painter in his native South Wales, much of Rosser's work refers to the dilemma of rendering a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. This classic conundrum has led Rosser into sculpture, back to drawing, and, most recently, away from gesture and toward works that include photography and kinetic elements. Fundamental to his physical solutions is Rosser's reference to the human form. In earlier works, the body was an explicit subject. With "Dislocated Emblems," Rosser uses the verticality of the figure as an implied coordinate, a way of orienting the viewer to the artist's psyche.

Some of Rosser's titles give us an indication of his thematic concerns. Titles like *Reflex and Memory-Revisited, Stages,* and *Union of Fortune-Tellers and Alchemy* allude to the artist's interest in universal concepts such as the duration of time, the mutability of perception, and the transitory nature of human experience. Poetics aside, Rosser has committed himself to deciphering the plethora of information that bombards us daily, organizing and dissecting his visual language and placing it in a wider, philosophical context. He has set as his task the creation of "emblems" that signify the very stuff of reality: time, motion, and memory. Throughout the exhibition, single works are constructed as sequential imagery, to be read in real time, from left to right, or from top to bottom. Machine-like, motorized components churn and whir, lending magically absurd qualities to the more formal elements. In each work we are met with a complement of sensory signposts, as the eye moves from form to shadow, from actual space to the ghostly residue of a form, from static imagery to rotating contraptions which emit low-level repetitive sounds that mimic the body's pulse.

Stages is indicative of the mind-body model that often inspires Rosser. The vertical orientation of the work is a metaphor for an ascendancy of states of being. Both the title and the graduated depths of the four panels seen in cross section also imply a spiritual hierarchy. The lowest panel is the shallowest, and supports a photographic image of Rosser's earlier wood sculpture (an homage to Tatlin, the Russian constructivist). This form suggests a skeletal structure, the framework of the physical body. The panel above is slightly deeper, and shows a rendering in oil paint of a mechanical structure that implies a visceral reality, i.e., the machine that activates the life force. The third segment, which is deeper yet, shows a photographic image of a wheel-like object that conjures thoughts of Duchamp's chocolate grinder, or the circular mandala form that serves the Hindus as a symbol for the universe. A smoky veil obscures the wheel, while the prominent scorched white line seems to incise it. The subtle, but seemingly accidental qualities of the image suggest the elusivity of thought. The fourth and uppermost panel is an ovoid shape, divided into quadrants, and floating in an empty field. The symmetry of the composition and homogeneity of the palette convey a contemplative mood akin to the calm that is achieved through spiritual enlightenment. Together the four panels are aligned with the viewer's standing presence, like an encounter of parallel persona.

Reflex and Memory-Revisited surveys the evolution of modern art history and its impact on our perceptions. Essentially a triptych, the three parts are again read in sequence, beginning on the left with the white panel, a formal composition that initially appears to refer to constructivism and Malevich's radical white painting. But Rosser has filled this spare surface with subtle comments on illusionism and postmodern deconstruction. The circular cut-outs on the framed, recessed board form a regular pattern of apertures into a mysterious subspace that alludes to the micro-scale of DNA patterns, or other measurements of the invisible natural world. The semicircular shadows are important to the composition because they create the actual depth with which illusionary painting perpetually struggles. Moving to the predominantly red section, the painting depicts a hybridized mechano-body reminiscent of Picabia's fanciful machine with human qualities. The third panel is photographic, a composite of images



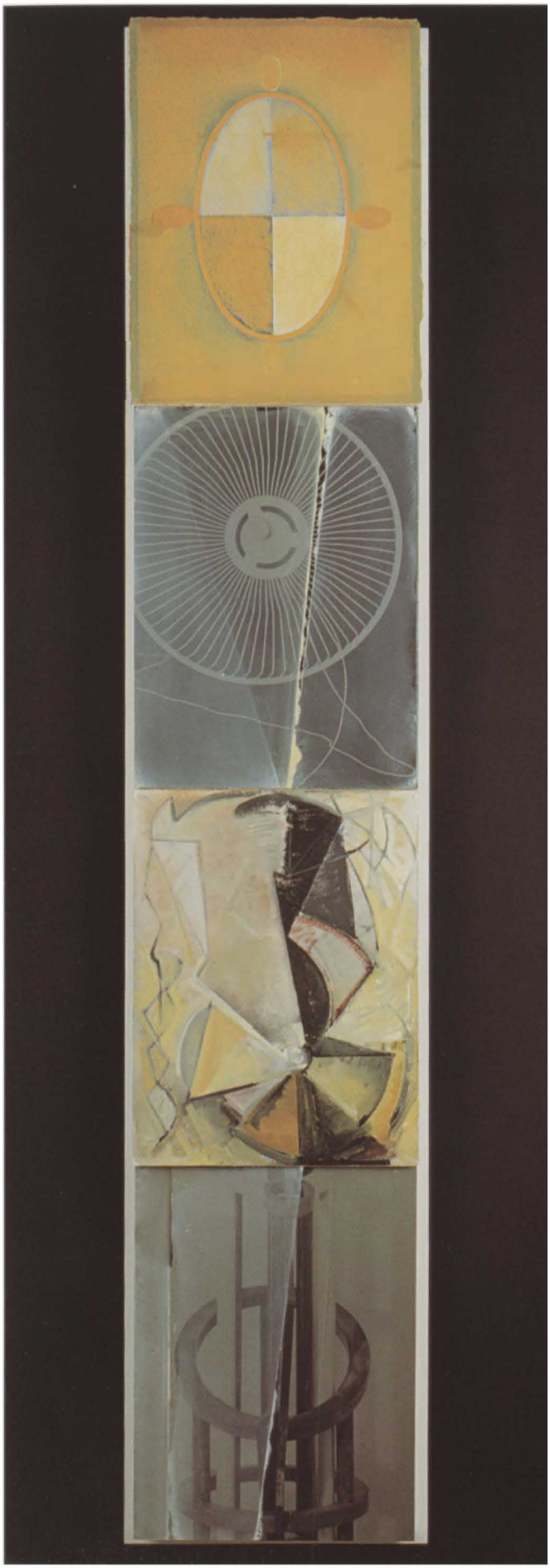
UNION OF FORTUNE-TELLERS AND ALCHEMY 1995

referring to Rosser's earlier work, but also akin to Man Ray's rayographs in their shadowy vestiges of a dematerialized reality. In front of the dark surface a moving, sculptural element casts actual shadows over those captured on the photo negatives. The pie-shaped wire wings reiterate the painted shape on the center section while they slowly rotate in the viewer's space, casting shadows that interact with the photography behind and the wall itself. This multiplicity of dimensions, from the minimal white section to the pulsating kinetic structure is intended to provoke questions that ultimately result in the realization that our understanding of reality is determined by the criteria we use to define it.

The largest and most complex piece in the "Dislocated Emblems" exhibition is *Union of Fortune-Tellers and Alchemy*. Again, Rosser's title is evocative. The reference to fortune tellers and alchemy places us in a mysterious realm, but the artist does not mean to transport us. Rather he presents alternatives for perceiving the real world that also embrace his knowledge of art history and a panoply of his now familiar images. Reading this work from right to left, the far right is a reductivist version of the content of *Stages*. The form is singular, the skeleton is stylized and the palette is limited to create a kind of hieroglyphic shorthand for the body. As the eye moves left, the personnage is translated into equivalent languages first of pure color and then gesture. The symmetrical design of primary-colored squares is proportionate to the human form, and thus is a logical progression from the linear rendition. But Rosser obscures the direct view by placing a translucent scrim over the colors, making the perception of the elongated grid ambiguous. As the viewer approaches, the edges of the squares are indistinct, but ironically, as the viewer retreats, the image is more focused. Moving onto the monochromatic segment, an impastoed and sanded surface supplants the ordered color grid. The final phase of the work is a motorized, three-dimensional manifestation of the vertical theme. Like the mechanical part of *Reflex and Memory-Revisited*, the wire structure rotates and simultaneously casts moving shadows onto the photographic panel behind. With *Union*, the metamorphoses of the body emblem from a diagram to a chromatic key, to an emotive rubbing, to a fully realized three-dimensional entity partakes of the alchemical process of changing one substance into another. Rosser reveals the magic of human perception in its ability to reinvent and reconsider reality.

"Dislocated Emblems" celebrates Rosser's dedication to his art and announces a most intriguing new phase of his accomplished creative life. We witness here not only the metaphorical alchemy of the work, but also the metamorphosis of the artist himself. Where earlier work was made within the limitations of a given medium or style (abstraction or figuration, drawing or sculpture), Rosser has forged a larger, more comprehensive language with which to translate the phenomena of life. An astute reader of art history, poetry and philosophy, as well as a professor, husband, and father, Rosser has gained a measure of self-knowledge and assurance that enables him to take new risks in an increasingly ambiguous world.

Daphne Anderson Deeds
Chief Curator



STAGES 1994-95

VERTICAL LANDSCAPE 1994-95

Checklist

1. INVENTORY
   1993-94, charcoal, paper, b/w photograph, wire and plexiglass
   72 x 48 in.

2. SKIPPING ROPE
   1994, oil paint, string and wood
   36 x 20 1/2 x 4 in.

3. STAGES
   1994-95, oil paint and b/w photograph on wood panel
   61 1/2 x 12 x 3 1/2 in.

4. RE-BOUND
   1995, oil paint on paper with b/w photograph
   15 x 23 in.

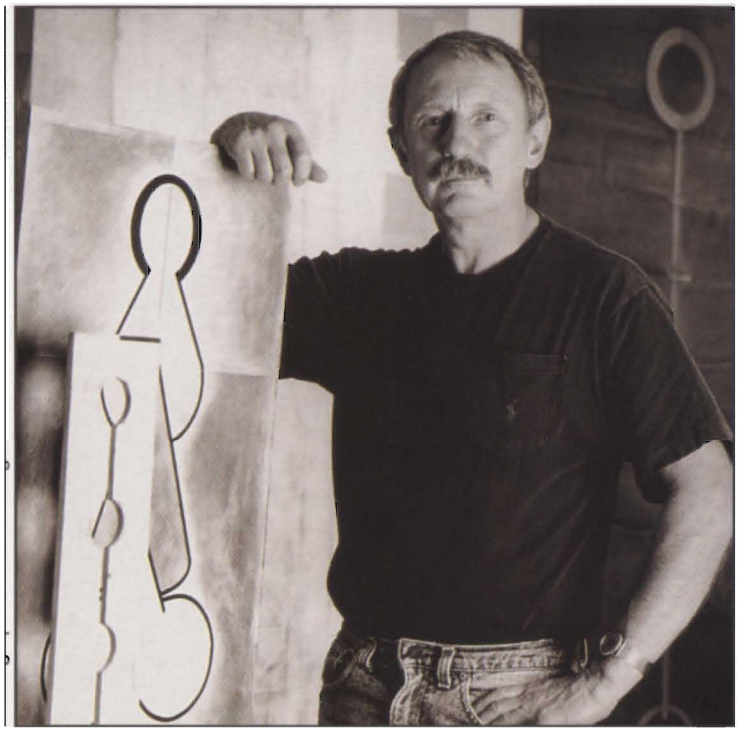
5. SIDE BY SIDE
   1995, oil and milk paint on paper with b/w photograph
   15 1/2 x 35 1/2 in.

6. VERTICAL LANDSCAPE
   1994-95, oil paint on wood panels with neon text
   110 x 40 x 10 in.

7. REFLEX AND MEMORY-REVISITED
   1995, paint and b/w photograph on wood panels with motorized element
   82 x 135 x 35 in.

8. UNION OF FORTUNE-TELLERS AND ALCHEMY
   1995, paint and b/w photograph on wood panels with motoized element
   92 x 139 x 20 in.

9. DOUBLE-BACK
   1995, oil paint on wood panels
   58 x 54 x 5 in.



Photograph: Rebecca Douglas

Biography

Warren Rosser is Chairman of the Painting and Printmaking Department of the Kansas City Art Institute. He was born in South Wales in 1942 and was educated at Cardiff College of Art in South Wales, and Goldsmith's College, University of London. In 1972, the Welsh artist moved from Britain to Kansas City to assume a temporary teaching position at the Kansas City Art Institute, and since that time he has been a vital part of that faculty. Widely respected and collected in both Great Britain and the U.S., Rosser's works are included in the National Museum of Wales, the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the IBM Corporate Collection in Kansas City, and the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, Lincoln, Nebraska.

All art work and photographs courtesy Jan Weiner Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri.

On the cover: REFLEX AND MEMORY-REVISITED 1995

Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one-person exhibitions of art by nationally recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth-century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who is contributing to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

The Sheldon Solo series is supported in part by the Nebraska Art Association and the Nebraska Arts Council through a Basic Support Grant.

Nebraska ARTS COUNCIL

SHELDON
MEMORIAL ART GALLERY & SCULPTURE GARDEN
12th and R Street University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 68588-0300

NEBRASKA ART ASSOCIATION