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The Offset Work of Les Krims: An Interpretive Critique

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In 1981 Les Krims produced an elaborate, limited edition portfolio of twenty silver prints consisting of fifteen black and white photographs slightly enlarged from 8 × 10 negatives, two 8 × 10 color contact prints, and three unique Polaroid SX-70 photographs. He called the folio "Idiosyncratic Pictures," and typified it as his "most ambitious portfolio project to date" and his "most beautiful and effective."¹ The work is visually complex and conceptually ambiguous. In the pristine clarity of large format photography Krims presents a plethora of objects and artifacts placed around and about nude men and women models in a variety of elaborate environments he has built and borrowed. Photographs are photographed in most of the pictures, and several contain various paper silhouettes, predominantly dogs and fishes, but also Victorian ladies and gentlemen, photographers and painters. These cutouts are variously pasted on walls, ceilings, tables, and floors. Also occurring in the images are functional and nonfunctional ladders, gardening tools, small piles of salt, personal hygiene products, model airplanes, mouse traps, cowboy boots, candy and gum wrappers, high heel shoes, large and small robots, toy animals, long dead tree branches, cardboard model buildings, starched shirt collars, arts advertisements, a cardboard cat house, Mickey Mouse, and cameras. Lengthy, sarcastically humorous, typeset titles have been placed within the sets and are photographed as additional information in the images.

The portfolio is highly self-referential in several senses. The most striking reference is to Krims himself. With cable release visible, he presents himself nude in nine of the fifteen images, and uses his name in two of the titles. In using himself as subject he affords himself neither more nor less respect than he affords his other models, and treats his sexuality as publicly and profanely as he treats the sexuality of the women he photographs. The portfolio seems to be built around autobiographical references, but separating fact from fiction is precarious. The folio also refers to itself. Many of the photographs in this portfolio contain other

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photographs from this portfolio. Objects, sets, props, and devices in one picture re-emerge in others. Finally, and most relevant to this essay, the portfolio refers to his older work, and in a sense is a retrospective exhibit of the corpus of his photographic venture. "Idiosyncratic Pictures" is informed by Krims' offset work, and the offset work, in turn, is informed by "Idiosyncratic Pictures."

The pervasive atmosphere of the folio is political. Krims expresses considerable resentment toward the art establishment with sarcastic commentary on the institutional art world in general and the politics of exhibition photography in particular. In the articulation of these particular expressions, a general cynicism about communal human existence emerges and neither Christians, Jews, Blacks, mothers nor lovers are spared Krims' jibes. The more sacrosanct the subject, the more biting is the humor.

As in his main offset works, "Idiosyncratic Pictures" contains highly provocative images which immediately engage the viewer by their power, but which simultaneously frustrate by their opacity. Succinct statements of interpreted meaning are extremely difficult to posit. We are confronted with images difficult to decipher, but which demand the attempt because they are so hard to forget. This article is an attempt to articulate interpretive meanings of Krims' three portfolios, *The Deerslayers*, *The Little People of America 1981*, *The Incredible Case of the Stack O'Wheats Murders*, and his two offset books, *Making Chicken Soup*, and *Fictcryptokrimsographs*, all of which are assumed to be available to readers of this journal. These pieces are not the only offset works by Krims, but are, I believe, his most important by virtue of their wide distribution, subsequent familiarity, and staying power. Krims is a prolific artist, and a frequent lecturer, but it is possibly by these five pieces that he is best known. His other offset work includes:² "Les Krims: 32 Post Cards from the Kodalith Image Series, 1968-1975," published by Galerie Die Brucke, Vienna, Austria, 1976, formerly distributed in the United States by Mythology Unlimited, Inc.; "previews," *Afterimage*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 & 2, May/June, 1976, which was four pages of the paper with fold and cut lines and instructions for assembling a small book of images, complete with cover, colophon, and so forth. Doubleday also published a slipcased portfolio of gravure reproductions in 1970 entitled "Eight Photographs: Leslie Krims."

I. The Deerslayers (1972)

The Deerslayers has the immediate aura of an anthropological study of deer hunters. It has semblances of scientific objectivity: the human subjects became available for the sampling by stopping at a specific check-in station during a deer season in New York state; by their awareness of the photographer and his camera they offer tacit consent to be part of the recorded sample; and each are recorded with their kill and their vehicle, at a standard distance, from similar angles of view, with the camera usually at their eye-levels. It is as if we were being presented a body of selected information to consider about a common social phenomenon.

