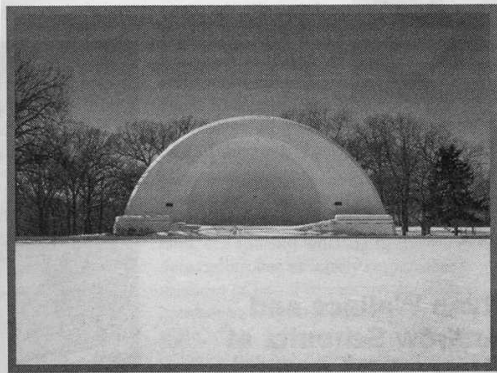


## Cindy Bernard at Margo Leavin Gallery

**N**o visual artist in Los Angeles is more identified with music than is Cindy Bernard. Not a composer or performer herself (like, say, Joyce Lightbody or Llyn Foulkes), Bernard works collaboratively with musicians, whether in the creation of audio-visual installations (such as those—including one in MOCA's newly opened *Visual Music*—realized with Joseph



Cindy Bernard, *Karl L. King Band Shell aka Oleson Park Bandshell* (*Works Progress Administration, 1938*) Fort Dodge, Iowa, 2004, chromogenic print, 24" x 32", at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Hammer), the photo-documentation of musical events, or the presentation of concerts. (Bernard is founder and director of the Society for the Activation of Social Space through Art and Sound, which coordinates a series of new-music concerts every summer at the Schindler House in West Hollywood.) With the sometime exception of her installational work, however, Bernard's intervention in the sonic sphere is not formal—synesthetic, ekphrastic or otherwise concerned with the visceral experience of music—so much as it is social. SASSAS doesn't make music, it facilitates the making of music. Similarly, Bernard's photographs

do not approximate the musical experience (as, say, Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalents* did), they document human beings experiencing music. Her latest series of photos is, if anything, further removed than ever from the actual presence of music and more concerned with the social role music plays in American life.

Indeed, if this *Bandshell* series directly documents any other art form, it would be architecture. Of course, architecture has famously been described as "frozen music"—and, given how many of these bandshells Bernard photographed around the northern Midwest in winter (during a residency at Northwestern University), the freeze factor—right down to the snow cover ringing the structures in question—is not a little apparent. But the exhibit, at least, included several California bandshells as well, their sunny countenances giving no indication of season. The frozenness of Bernard's implied music comes across more in the total absence of people. The bandshells testify to musicality with their acoustically determined shapes; they are musical artifacts, situated in public spaces, and in their muteness Bernard lets them either provoke our associations or assume the social signification of "music" per se. This emblematic passivity is as effective as it is in great part because these associations and signifiers have been so thoroughly impressed upon our memory cells. Whether we grew up actually going to outdoor concerts or just seeing *The Music Man*, the bandshell is likely to have affixed itself somewhere in our nostalgia banks.

For those of us who have graduated from Sunday in the Park with George M. Cohan to a more nuanced appreciation of public architecture—and its documenters—Bernard's deadpan, head-on approach to bandshells places her squarely in a Germanic tradition of architectural photography, from Albert Renger-Patzsch to Bernd and Hilla Becher to Candida Höfer. American photo-realist painting and new topographic photography precurse Bernard's method here, but her classicizing and self-effacing tidiness, centering each bandshell at the locus of all sightlines, is nothing if not Becherian. (Indeed, Bernard out-Bechers the Bechers by invariably presenting but a single, "perfect" view of each bandshell, introducing a Zen-like context of sudden comprehension.)

Again, Bernard concerns herself, here as elsewhere, with music as a factor in our lives, not as an art form parallel to hers. Her participation in MOCA's survey of synesthesia—and her unimpeachable dedication through SASSAS to music as music—notwithstanding, she chooses not to make "music for the eyes." Rather, she follows in music's footsteps, observing its habits, finding its

lairs, hunting it in its absence like a zoologist of the ear. Perhaps we can call Bernard's approach musical ecology.

—Peter Frank

Cindy Bernard closed in December at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

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