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Craig Krull Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

## Fluent in the language of paint

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

**Stephen Aldrich** shows a group of dense black-and-white collages made from cut-up engravings. Aldrich wields an X-Acto knife like a pencil, slicing the detailed contours of people, places and things that have already been rendered as works of art once before. He recombines them, often by category -- animals, architecture, 19th century genre scenes, machinery, etc. -- and art begets art.

The technique is familiar from earlier artists such as San Francisco's Jess Collins (1923-2004) and Arizona's Frederick Sommer (1905-99). Aldrich worked as Sommer's studio assistant for many years, and he still lives in Prescott, Ariz. His collages are less Surrealist in tone and feeling than those of Jess or Sommer, but like theirs, his rely on a fantasist's fondness for imagination as reality's ultimate expression.

In the show, most of Aldrich's collages are assembled on a geometric armature. Most common is the two-dimensional grid -- fragments of organic seascapes and landscapes subjected to neat, orderly rows of rectangular cutouts ("A Fractal Aspect"), for example, or gesticulating figures inserted into theatrical prosceniums ("All the World's a Stage"). Others curve like orbiting satellites ("Aphelion"), spiral endlessly ("Jerusalem") or are spatially woven like a tapestry ("Eldorado").

One of the most beautiful exploits stuttering repetition, with multiple copies of fragments of Albrecht Dürer's famous 1513 engraving "Knight, Death and the Devil" fanned out across the sheet like a deck of cards. Titled "The Art of the Fugue," it assembles a variety of Germanic religious and mythological images into a complex, contrapuntal visual form. Aldrich arrays these images across an architectural facade, like a private fever dream enshrined as a public mural.

That tension between personal imagination and public construction finds its apogee in "America," a spectacle of machinery, pistons, flywheels, tractor engines and locomotives. Given the machine-production of engravings, the work doubles as an embodiment of what it depicts. This America is both chillingly beautiful and coldly sinister, fantastically inventive and inescapably threatening. Aldrich locates the contradiction in our Victorian-era past, which created the environment we inhabit today.