

Michael Asher • *Untitled*, 1991

The work of Michael Asher arises from the belief that no individual art object has a universal meaning, independent of its institutional context. Asher, and other prominent conceptual artists who emerged in the 1970s, believe that the spaces and practices of the museum or gallery - its methods of interpreting, publicizing, and displaying works of art - condition how we understand the art that is exhibited there. Throughout his career, Asher has dramatized this view by adopting the museum or institution as his "medium." His techniques call attention to the architectural, design, or administrative strategies of the organizations that present art, and help to control or shape its significance.

Although Asher is a seminal figure in Los Angeles and has been widely recognized in Europe, his untitled project for the Stuart Collection is his only permanent public outdoor work in the United States. This functional, polished, granite drinking fountain is an exact replica of commercial indoor metal fountains typically found in business offices and government buildings. Instead of its usual context as interior office furniture, the fountain is placed monument like on a grass island in the center of Myers Drive next to the university administration offices and the Price Center. The siting of his work is fundamental to its meaning; it is juxtaposed with a large American flag and a granite landmark commemorating Camp Matthews, a World War II training center and artillery and rifle range which occupied the land on which UCSD now stands.

Asher's work projects several cultural references into one modest object, and it is a play on sculpture's historic role as representation. As an ironically monumentalized fragment of any banal administrative environment, the drinking fountain mirrors the nearby monument to Camp Matthews, suggesting continuity between the institutions of defense and of learning, of the military and the university. The fountain, in its modesty and its reversal of the traditional grandeur of water fountains as public monuments, also calls to mind Southern California's need to manage and preserve its natural resources in light of the ongoing water crisis caused by large-scale agricultural and urban development.

Folklore -- Students have decided that it is good luck to drink from the fountain's "smart water" before an important exam.