Crown Point Press
Newsletter
Fall 1997

Overview


Ruth Fine, Wayne Thiebaud and Kathan Brown, Washington D.C., 1997.

Excerpts from

A Conversation

at the National Gallery of Art
Wayne Thiebaud and Kathan Brown with Ruth Fine
June 8, 1997

FINE: Welcome. I'm Ruth Fine, curator of Modern Prints and Drawings here at the National Gallery. This afternoon's program is to celebrate the opening of our Crown Point Press exhibition, which is in the East Wing of the Gallery. Crown Point Press was founded thirty-five years ago by Kathan Brown who's our guest on my far left. The exhibition includes about 100 of the approximately 1000 prints she has published. Crown Point has published about 100 artists and 50 of them are represented in the exhibition. I selected them, along with Steven Nash and Karin Breuer of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, where an expanded version of the show will be on view this fall and winter.

Wayne Thiebaud, who is to my immediate left, was the first artist that Kathan Brown invited to work at Crown Point Press. Kathan is an artist as well as a printer by training, and she started the press as a kind of community workshop where a number of artists worked, including Richard Diebenkorn. But Thiebaud was the first one who she actually issued an invitation to—this was in 1964—and he is working there to this day. I've talked with each of them individually over the years but have not myself had the opportunity to hear them talk about working together. So why don't we start with Kathan telling us why she invited Wayne to Crown Point, and then Wayne telling us why he went and what happened when he did.

BROWN: I invited Wayne because I saw a show of paintings of pies and cakes of his in San Francisco. I just thought they were wonderful, and so surprising at that time. He hadn't had a show yet in New York. I had started the press a couple years earlier, as Ruth said, for myself and my friends. I didn't know Wayne, but I called him up and asked him if he'd like to do some etchings. I was fortunate that Richard Diebenkorn a year earlier had called me to ask if he could work in the Crown Point studio. Since I didn't actually invite him, we can say Wayne was the first.

FINE: What did you find when you got there?

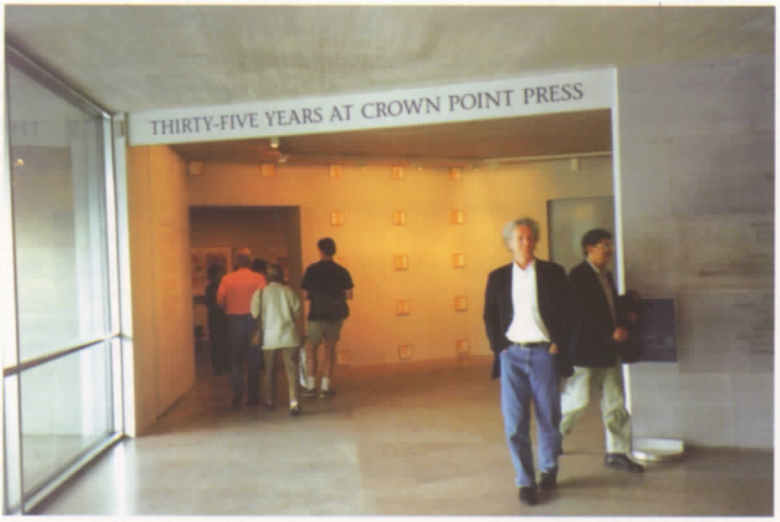
THIEBAUD: Trouble. The only etchings I had ever done were by taking a piece of plastic, scratching on it and then running it through an old fashioned washing machine ringer. You can imagine what they looked like.

BROWN: He showed them to me. I said, "I think we can make them look better."

THIEBAUD: Thank goodness. Kathan really taught me what possibilities there were with etching. We spent quite a bit of time in the next weeks or months doing lots of small plates, trying all kinds of things like sugar lift and aquatint and hard ground, soft ground. She introduced me and showed me all those possibilities. That was a real joy, a real pleasure, having a chance to learn something about that marvelous process.

FINE: Wayne, could you tell us a little bit about the workshop you went to when you first were there? It was in Kathan's home, and now, 35 years later, we are used to very professional-looking shops.

THIEBAUD: Well, it was in the basement. Kathan and I and her son, Kevin, and a wonderful Dalmatian dog, along with some cats, were the principle inhabitants. We just really worked. When lunch time came she would go upstairs and fix us lunch. The workshop was very basic, perfectly adequate, not fancy, not overly developed. She took the most important aspects of doing etchings and worked with quite simple means. It's the idea of taking a little bit of technology and trying to turn it into as much as you can. It's the opposite concept to that of a technocrat who lets you know you



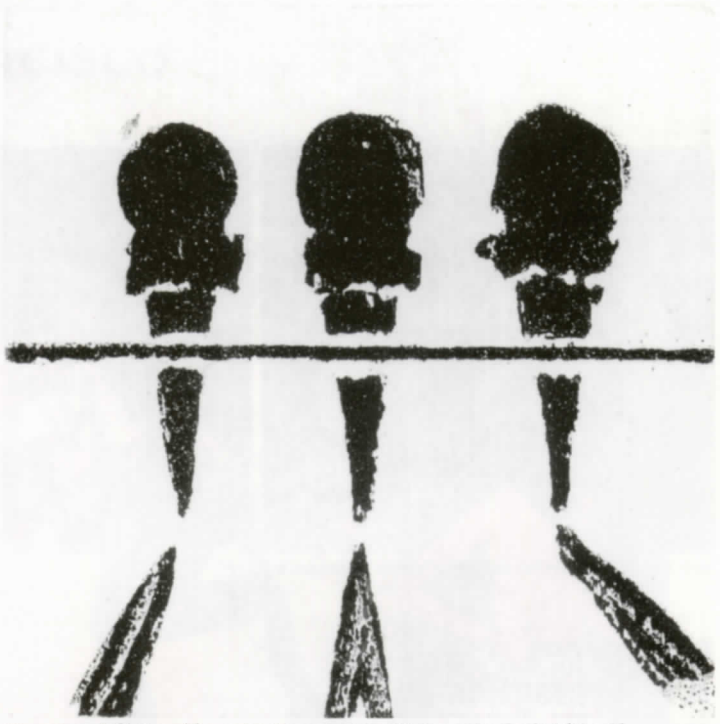
The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., June 1997.

are involved in technology and seems to be wondering in what way the results measure up to that technology. That's one of the things about Kathan's philosophy that in my opinion has always maintained itself. She's very generous in allowing painters to do what they want to do. For example, I notice that you never get comments from the printers. People don't rush up and say, "That's wonderful" while you're working. You appreciate that, because in your own mind you're always questioning what it is you're doing anyway.

BROWN: I learned that from you, actually, and I have applied it to everybody else. I don't think you actually told me not to make comments. Maybe it came out in some discussions we had. Anyhow, I do have the idea that this whole workshop is first an artist's studio. I tell artists we are turning this place over to them to use as their own studio, with the printers to help them. If I'm talking about Crown Point in a lecture or something, I often say I'm trying to put the artist in a position to do his or her best work, real work, not manufacturing. Doing something that starts with the idea of a print, the intention of doing a print, and using all these materials and presses and stuff. Now, if you're in your own studio, you really wouldn't have somebody bursting in on you and saying, "Oh, that's great!" I tell my printers that the wrong comment at the wrong moment can wreck things. But not to artificially hold back. If it seems the artist is asking for some attentive comment, then you respond. For me, working with Wayne was a great beginning, Wayne and Dick Diebenkorn. I was very lucky to start out with them. They both taught me a lot about how to have an artist in the studio and create an environment that works.

FINE: The prints you did at Crown Point at the very beginning are the prints that are in the book called Delights. *I'm curious about why you were interested in making prints and also about the relationship between making prints and making paintings.*

THIEBAUD: It's a sort of symbiotic relationship. How do you figure out how to transpose visual images from one kind of sensibility or media to another? You have, for instance, a painting of ice cream cones and the painting is a fairly good size. It has color and it has texture. It has a certain character dependent upon the technology of the paint. The question is, when you translate it into something smaller, in black and white let's say, and printed, what do you do, and what's the intrigue, why do it? Well, I think the intrigue is in the relationship between one kind of thing and another; what the differences are, the distinctions. What can you give to it in this smaller format which legitimizes it and makes it interesting enough to be something other than just a record of what you have done in painting? It actually in some ways transfers itself to a different kind of sensibility. It's like seeing one of your friends that you know very well, and they have changed. It's like that. You still have a relationship, but it is different. You can appreciate that and improvise on it. That's wonderful, because one kind of work informs the other. You then might go back to painting and decide you want to reduce the means. Maybe you've become melodramatic, insistent on too much color, or the wrong kind of color. So it's a continuing process. I love doing prints. Prints and paintings do inform each other. It's one of those great things I think it is a privilege to do.



Sugar Cones, 1964. Sugar lift aquatint. Paper size: 15 x 11"; image size: 5 x 5". Edition 25. Printed by Kathan Brown. Published by the artist.

BROWN: When you're working in color, you have to think of it in layers. You can't put a little white here and a little red there, all at the same time, in the same thought. You have to organize your thoughts a bit more. It makes you think about things that you might do unconsciously in painting.

THIEBAUD: It teaches you something I emphasize in trying to work with students. I think in your own studio there might be a tendency to do what Richard Diebenkorn liked to call being headlong—where you just go the easiest way. You get started, and then without interrupting yourself or having an intellectual recess, you just keep going. When you do that, you tend to make work that is one dimensional. What printmaking does is to force you, by Kathan's reference, to stop and try to anticipate what's going to happen. That, coupled with the fact that you're always surprised at what does happen, ends up giving you some orchestration of various sensibilities and opportunities. Probably that's the reason we have printmaking in university art departments. Not necessarily to make prints or create printmakers, but to be part of the intellectual, physiological and technical combine which is the process of visual enterprise.

FINE: Crown Point essentially is known as an etching workshop, but between 1982 and 1994 Kathan also sponsored artists going first to Japan and then to China to make woodcuts. Two of the woodcuts that Wayne made in Japan, Dark Cake *and* Candy Apples *are in the show. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the experience of working in Japan.*

THIEBAUD: Well, it was a wonderful opportunity. In Kyoto, Kathan gave us a lesson on Japanese history every morning. Then we would go out and see the sights. But first, of course, we would

go to the workshop to check color proofs of the work. The carving is done by very expert Japanese carvers before you arrive. You send them a watercolor or a gouache. They carve as many as 25, 35, 40 blocks which are printed in sequence by a superb printer sitting cross-legged and applying the watercolor ink by hand to each block, one by one, and proofing it. What we did was to go back to the studio every once in awhile and see what changes should be developed. It was an education in that process, the old traditional Japanese method of making marvelous block prints. We always had to speak through an interpreter, Takada, who would tell us what the printer said. If we asked a question in English he would respond in Japanese and then it would be translated, sort of like slow motion talking.

FINE: What inspired you to start the Japanese woodcut project, Kathan?

BROWN: I think I was just restless. It was on Crown Point's twentieth birthday. We hadn't done anything but etching for twenty years. I didn't think I should try to do litho because, well, there are too many people doing too good a job of it, and I don't really understand it very well myself. I had made a trip to Japan previously, and I was so impressed. I love Japan. I saw the old prints, which I had admired before, and discovered that there are still printers who know how to do that. So I thought we could try it. Also, there were lucky things that came together and made it possible. Takada had come over to the United States to go to school, and later he became a printer at Crown Point. He had worked at Crown Point for several years before I got the idea to work in Japan. He understood what would be needed to work with an artist, and was able to communicate that to the Japanese printer. He found the printer through a Japanese artist in Kyoto named Shoichi Ida, and between Takada and Ida they managed to talk the printer, Tadashi Toda, into taking us on. It wasn't really easy. Everybody there was sort of frightened of us, what we might demand and so on. I didn't exactly make a plan and then carry it through. It was just a series of lucky breaks that allowed it to happen. This was even more true of the China program.

FINE: Wayne, do you have any urge to do woodcuts in a Western style as a result of having done them in the Japanese style? You started out doing relief prints very early on?

THIEBAUD: Yes, I've done some, some linoleum cuts and woodcuts. Yes, I'm willing to sin in any medium. I think one of the things about printmaking and its variety is that each process has certain strengths and certain powers, all quite different. I must say, however, I think etching is the queen of them all. It's more variable. For me at least, it's richer and has more interest. But I do enjoy all of the print media. I collect prints and like to have prints around.

BROWN: When I started to do etchings someone said, "Oh, that's not going to work with any contemporary artist because litho is the modern medium." Abstract Expressionism was so strong then. Litho had us beat with the idea that you could make it and see it immediately. Some people thought no one would ever be interested in etching because of its difficulty and remoteness. Also, it's much more time consuming, something else the modern world is not supposed to like. But when artists get involved in it they really see the beauty. It's really there.

THIEBAUD: Well that's the reason you do it, of course. If someone asks why you bother to do etchings it probably means they haven't had a chance in their own experience to see what aesthetic beauty there is in that process. It's undeniable for me. Nothing can quite duplicate that marvelous etched line and those velvet passages and the power of the relationship between the ink and the paper.

FINE: I think of you as an artist who looks at your work within the context of art history. It would seem to me that etching, being one of the older printmaking media, also gives you a long historical line to think of in terms of ancestors. What do you think?

THIEBAUD: I'm a real, well I guess the word is, thief, really. I love art history and I love what it does for us. I see it as kind of a private game refuge where we keep all those extraordinary examples of what it's possible to do. So it's in a sense the bureau of standards that you feel privileged to be in some ways, however minor, connected to. That community of excellence, at least for me, represents the wellspring by which you live. In my judgment there are three worlds that the artist operates in. One is that world called the art world, not meaning the scene but meaning the whole tradition of painting and drawing and the whole concept of visual literacy. That world is very, very important. Another world is the world of reality. The shared consensus world that we all might agree on as a kind of substantive generalized sense of reality as far as we can know it. The real world so to speak. The other world is the world of private perception: each individual's total series of considerations as a whole, your whole psychological being and experience.

Somehow those three worlds have to come together in some

Candy Apples, 1987. Color woodblock print. Paper size: 23 1/2 x 24 1/2"; image size: 15 1/2 x 16 1/2". Edition 200. Printed by Tadashi Toda.

kind of percentage of equality. I think if they get out of whack too far, if it's only about the art world for example, then artists are only talking to each other. The critics are only criticizing for each other. It's a very limited kind of world in my opinion, however interesting or exciting it might be as a cabalistic or secret society. On the other hand, if there's too much emphasis on reality, even if we could produce the real world, what would we do with it since we already have one? But having a foot in that world is very important, though not to the extent that it eliminates the personal world. Yet if it's too personal, if it's only about yourself, then there is the danger of a kind of narcissism or solipsism. I think that also has a very strong limitation. The challenge of trying to negotiate and orchestrate those three very separate sensibilities offers the possibility of the altered worlds that painters make for us to see.

FINE: Kathan, what about you and the notion of tradition? I think one of the things that's been important to you is to use the traditional media of etching and woodcut in the shop, and to push boundaries in various ways. How do you think the importance of having a long line of historical precedents has fed into your thinking?

BROWN: Etching and woodcut are the two printmaking media that don't have any commercial use now. They have no real viability in the regular commercial world. So it seems to me the only way they're going to stay alive is if artists use them. It was thrilling for me to go to China and Japan, especially China because that was where printing was invented. Nobody ever printed anything before woodcut was invented in China in about the year 800 CE, and there are still people printing just exactly that way. And we were able to go there with our artists and work with those printers, with that process that has been handed down all those centuries. We got there just in time. I don't know how long it will continue now. Anyhow, I found that very exciting. For me it was just neat to do that. I don't want to make too much of saving the world or saving the processes or anything, but joining old processes to really new ideas, with artists who are on the edge of art is exciting.

Crown Point has never been particularly technically innovative. At least that's never been my intention. We've worked with these old processes. We've used the old traditional ways. Actually the techniques we use in etching are not a whole lot different from the ones that Rembrandt and Goya used. They've been upgraded a little bit but not very much. Everything is done with your hands. It's very tactile, very sensual. We use materials like soap and sugar and tar and wax, copper. I feel happy with that. When I took litho in school it was always formulas and chemicals and things. It's not like that with etching. It's all so straight ahead. This is a temperamental thing for me, probably.

FINE: Wayne, you've done several of your recent prints in two versions. I wondered if you would talk a little bit about the process of deciding to do two versions.

THIEBAUD: Printmaking offers a good chance to serialize a single idea to see how it can operate. This is a kind of standard procedure, isn't it, for painters? If you see the Picasso show [then at the National Gallery] you notice the same essential visual thought stretched out in front of you in, let's say, six or eight ways. What the painter is doing is looking for a difference between what you think is going to happen as opposed to what actually visually occurs. So the idea of making a couple of versions of something, let's say you print all the plates in black and white as opposed to using the color plates the way you'd planned. You have two different versions and that changes really everything or a great number of things. That's a very important construct in formal investigation.

FINE: There is a Wayne Thiebaud show in New York right now at the Allan Stone Gallery which includes some wonderful new paintings of river scenes. You mentioned you were thinking about making some prints that are related to them. I wonder whether you have in your mind how you want to start? Do you have a sense of how you're going to approach these prints?

THIEBAUD: I hate to say this in front of Kathan but I don't. This time I might come into the studio without my sketches.

BROWN: I usually tell people not to bring sketches. The artists who stew too much in advance about coming to work with us usually waste a lot of time at the start getting over that nervousness. Wayne doesn't do that; he's done so much printmaking. But sometimes an artist who's never worked in etching does too much planning. They go and look at every etching in the museum print study room, they do hundreds of drawings. That's fine, of course. But it's hard to get past all that in the first couple of days they're working. They make too many plans.

THIEBAUD: I just want to say that one of the problems today that causes a lot of anxiety and a lot of difficulty is the term "art." I'd like to suggest that printmaking is more important than art. The reason is this: that we still are trying to figure out what art is. It's based on discourse, words, ideas. It's changing all the time. However attractive and interesting and fascinating the concept of art may be—painting and printmaking are real things that you can look at, love, get pleasure from. They don't even have to be art. I don't imagine mine are art. But they're there. You can see them. You can look at them. Don't worry about whether this is art or not, whether it's high art, low art, mid art. All of that, I think, is something which has made a terrible kind of confusion about something that gives us such pleasure and creates these alternate worlds for us to look at. So as far as I'm concerned, printmaking is more important than art.

FINE: Those are the best words for an ending that I can imagine. Thank you both, and thanks to all of you in the audience for coming. Please go and enjoy the show.

Notes

In the Crown Point Gallery
September 10 - November 8
Wayne Thiebaud at Crown Point Press (1964-1997)

At the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco
October 4, 1997 - January 18, 1998
Thirty-Five Years at Crown Point Press

The exhibition catalog, *Thirty-Five years at Crown Point Press: Making Prints, Doing Art*, is published by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco with the University of California Press. It is available at the exhibition, from booksellers, and at Crown Point Press. $30.

New Editions 1997

Wayne Thiebaud

River Edge, 1997. Drypoint with spit bite aquatint on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 22$^{5}/_{8}$ x 22$^{1}/_{2}$"; image size: 15 x 15". Edition 35. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Marina Ridge, 1997. Drypoint on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 21 x 17"; image size: 11 x 9". Edition 35. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Crown Point Press
San Francisco

Invites you to visit the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, October 4, 1997 - January 4, 1998
to see the exhibition *Thirty-Five Years at Crown Point Press. (Catalog available $30.00)*

And announces publication of a new portfolio of 15 etchings and drypoints accompanied by a hard-cover
book with photos and text by Kathan Brown, *Why Draw a Live Model?. ($15.00)*

Live Model Group

Fred Dalkey

Enrique Chagoya

Nathan Oliveira

June Felter

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