

# Overview

## A Conversation with Crown Point Printers



From left to right: Hidekatsu Takada, Wendy Diamond, Marcia Bartholme, Renée Bott, Kathan Brown, Lawrence Hamlin.

**Wendy Diamond:** One thing that I have always been interested in, is what happens when an artist first arrives, the very first day, how do you get them into working and to what extent have they already decided what they want to do and how to use the process?

**Marcia Bartholme:** Sometimes they think they have an idea of what etchings should look like, but it's often changed very quickly. Usually the first thing we do is we all look at prints for awhile and try to get a feel for the kind of line or texture or surfaces that interest them. Then we do a few test plates.

**Lawrence Hamlin:** Elaine de Kooning, for example, came in without any background at all, never having made an etching, and she was wonderful. She just instantly started doing something really very different than how we would have set it up. Her test plates ended up being terrific.

**Hidekatsu Takada:** What happened was, Elaine's original idea about etching was to use a needle in the hardground. But when we explained the aquatint method, and she realized that each particle of rosin powder is a protector against the acid, then she had an idea—she started using her fingers—

**Kathan Brown:** She's so tactile, as most artists are; they like to have their fingers and hands in things all the time.

**HT:** And then she asked, "Can we etch that?", and yes, we etched the plate and she liked it, and we did a whole series like that.

**KB:** It's a good example of why the artist has to understand what they're doing and

why we've never wanted to just give them a plate and say, OK, now you do this and you do this. You know, one-two-three instructions. Instead, we start out by pointing out the principle of the aquatint, how the rosin works, in a simple way so they don't get bogged down in the words. And at the same time we give them the plate, the physical plate with the aquatint on it; then they can grasp it whole. That way they can come up with something that feels like their way of working. It's a better way to teach, to present the whole rather than work by rote.

**WD:** But how do you get to that first place where you're offering them the simplest explanation of what an aquatint is or what a softground or whatever is, and a plate is prepared for them? Is there a moment at the time they're first looking at prints, that you sense which simple thing to explain to them first?

**KB:** Well, usually there's one thing that they've seen that really intrigues them and that's the place to start. And then they can move into other things. The whole idea is really to create an excitement. I always think the first day of a project is very highly charged. The artist already feels excitement, or they wouldn't be here; it's an interesting challenge to them. And, perhaps, if they're here for the first time, it is a little intimidating also. So it's very, very important that energy, excitement and the feel of the beauty of the medium is immediately communicated by us.

**WD:** So they don't get bogged down with the fear of the technical aspect?

**Renée Bott:** It's not only that. For an artist to have two or three or four other people standing there expecting something is difficult at first. We try to make the artist aware that we are not really expecting anything, but are there to help him or her, and we're aware that art builds slowly.

**WD:** An artist has flown all the way across the country or around the world, and here they are. They must have the feeling that they've got to do it; they're on the spot.

**KB:** They do feel that. In some ways that's good. A lot of artists actually work better under pressure. They like to be working for a show, or towards finishing a particular project, and some of that is involved when they come here. In some ways we have an advantage in that most of our artists have to travel to work here.

**WD:** The adrenalin gets going. The mind set and the intention are all there.

**KB:** And it's very focused.

**WD:** I know we've had artists that tend to be shy. The printer's role becomes very important then, in making them feel comfortable.

**MB:** Well, we try not to be intrusive and to disappear when it's timely, and generally the first day or so, there's a definite breaking in. But after the first couple of test plates come out, things usually settle down because there is something they actually produced and they can see what happens. Then things begin to roll.

**WD:** Are there times when an artist needs to draw completely away from the main studio where all the activity is?

**KB:** That happens rarely. More rarely than you would expect.

**MB:** If it's clear that they're really concentrating on something, we never interrupt. We just let them tell us when they have finished something.

**WD:** So the goal is to make the studio their own place for the time that they're here.

**KB:** Yes. That's why we don't have any more than one artist here at a time. To go off to another room to draw is a little bit artificial, unless the artist very extremely needs privacy. I can only recall one case like that in 20 years or so. Mostly people like to work in the big room. We can tell when they're getting settled down to work, when they want us there and when they don't. If they want you, they look up, they look around, they wonder where you are. When you see a desperate look you run right over.

**MB:** Everybody who comes through here, (continued on page 2)



## Conversation...

you know, they're all different. After a couple of days you sort of get a sense of when to be there and when not to be there and understand the rhythm of how they work. And they get a sense of what the printers are doing. So we get to a point where the artist will just be tuning everything out that doesn't affect them, and we'll be pulling a proof, and things are just running along. The familiarity builds up, and there's some sort of relaxation, just all of us working.

**WD:** What about the mechanics of getting that to happen? For instance, I know that on each project there's one person who's responsible, and the artist knows this person is the head printer on the project. So they have one person that they talk to mainly.

**RB:** That function is very important because if the artist is talking to one person only, then no communication can get crossed. Also, at times, there have been four of us working on a project, and we all need to be directed. It's not that the artist doesn't talk to everybody, as they want to and need to, but the artist realizes and the printers realize that there is one person in charge.

**WD:** I would imagine it also takes the questioning out of the artist's mind: who should I tell? Who's responsible for the aquatint?

Who's dealing with the paper?

**KB:** The artist doesn't have to think about that.

**LH:** Also, some of the aspects of the process take an awful lot of time, and it would be impossible for everybody to be always in touch. When you're spending an hour and a half delicately painting out a certain section, you need to concentrate fully. If the artist needs help during that time, you don't need to drop things; someone else is there. Having one person in charge means that the workload can be divided out and tasks can be done without interruption.

**WD:** And what does Kathan do? She's not the head printer, although she knows about printing. She's in the studio when an artist is working. What role does Kathan play?

**HT:** A printer who is in charge of a project, needs Kathan's help, obviously, calls Kathan's attention when help is needed. At the same time she is always watching everything and she understands what's going on. But she doesn't interfere, ever, unless the printer asks her for advice. All the very difficult decisions...

**MB:** Usually brainstorming, when everybody sort of comes up against something and we're deciding what the best approach is.

**WD:** Usually technical decisions?

**HT:** Technical decisions included, but mostly people decisions. Kathan takes care of the artist, psychologically.

**RB:** Also, there's that communication, too. The artist feels that there's someone in the room who is more a peer of his or hers, and maybe that he can relate or she can relate to on a different level.

**WD:** Well, I would imagine the printers really try to stay away from aesthetic conversation with the artists, because you don't want to inhibit their exploration.

**MB:** Right.

**HT:** Kathan can talk about those things and we overhear this and then we can get a better idea. That's a trick we have.

**KB:** Well, I usually don't bring up aesthetic issues, unless we are feeling confusion about them. But sometimes an artist will ask me what I think, and sometimes we just get into a conversation; it's natural.

**LH:** Kathan also serves as an overseer for the schedule. A lot of times on a project, we'll lose a reasonable track of what time is, and how much needs to be done before a deadline. Occasionally, the artist tends to narrow in on something that, you know, isn't towards

*(continued on page 3)*

## Late News

We have just signed a lease for our California studio and gallery at 817 Folsom Street in San Francisco. We will be moving into our new space by September 1.

## New Editions

We have been very busy this season with a lot of different artists—some new and some who have made prints with us before. John Cage came just after the New Year, once again introducing new innovations in printmaking. He extended his ideas from the 1985 *Fire* series by using burned Japanese gampi paper as chine collé on handmade Farnsworth paper. Richard Diebenkorn followed Cage in January, finishing two very beautiful and exciting new works. Pat Steir has done another series of monoprints based on self portrait quotations from many different artists and a large color etching that incorporates her ideas about stylistic variation and artistic signature. William Brice, here for the first time, made six prints that are beautifully balanced and delicately colored.

The Japanese woodblock projects continue with woodblock printer Tadashi Toda and woodcarver Shunzo Matsuda. Robert Mangold's print brings the effect of his large paintings to paper. Sylvia Plimack Mangold also used the woodblock medium to wonderful effect in her print, communicating both a feeling about a real landscape and a sense of the print as an object.

*Please inquire about prices and availability:*

the main heart of the project, and she will be able to make a judgment about whether to try to work on a straight path so that we can get the most amount of work done, or whether to encourage the deviation.

**WD:** So Kathan is a more objective person in the whole constellation.

**HT:** That's what we think Kathan stands for... But, I don't know, maybe we should ask Kathan.

**KB:** Well, I think it's a team operation and that's the most important thing, really. Any kind of teamwork always involves each person having a role and fulfilling that, but with an eye to the other people, so there's a sensitive interaction. One can step into another's shoes, when it's needed, but each person has a general area: I'm taking the ball from here to here, unless I can be more effective there. I think we really function very well that way and, consequently, we can provide a better situation for an artist than any one printer could alone.

**WD:** Well, there are some shops, I know, where the head of the shop, the director or whoever, is also the main printer and that's very different in terms of what you're saying, in terms of this spread-out balance of energy in our team.

**KB:** Of course, that's how most shops do it. I mean, that's how you have to start.

**WD:** And that's how we started?

**KB:** Very early on, I worked alone. But as soon as I had people working with me, I began to try to make it into a team thing.

**WD:** That idea is carried forward in that we don't have master printers and assistants, it's just the head printer and an assistant or two per project and the top job rotates.

**KB:** When a printer's ready to have their own project, they get it. Printers work here a year or more before they become in charge of a project. I need to be sure that the person can handle it, and it's not just technical skill—it's also organizing ability and personality. It is an extremely demanding job.

**WD:** Have you ever seen a print in the middle of a project where it just doesn't go, it doesn't have a zing, it doesn't work? The artist isn't really happy and you can see it too? In a case like that, where do you think the responsibility might mostly lie? Is it the artist and his or her inability to, at that point, make his conception come across, or is it the printer's not understanding what the artist wanted? Or is it something in that communication that just fell apart?

**MB:** Well, if that situation occurs, it usually

means the print isn't finished yet. My immediate response is to say, if the artist seems unhappy, that we should start by discussing what it is in the print that the artist is not liking. We try to get them to express what isn't working and then we can go through the technical means we have to make it work better. That can include things like changing printing order, adjusting color, re-making a plate or...

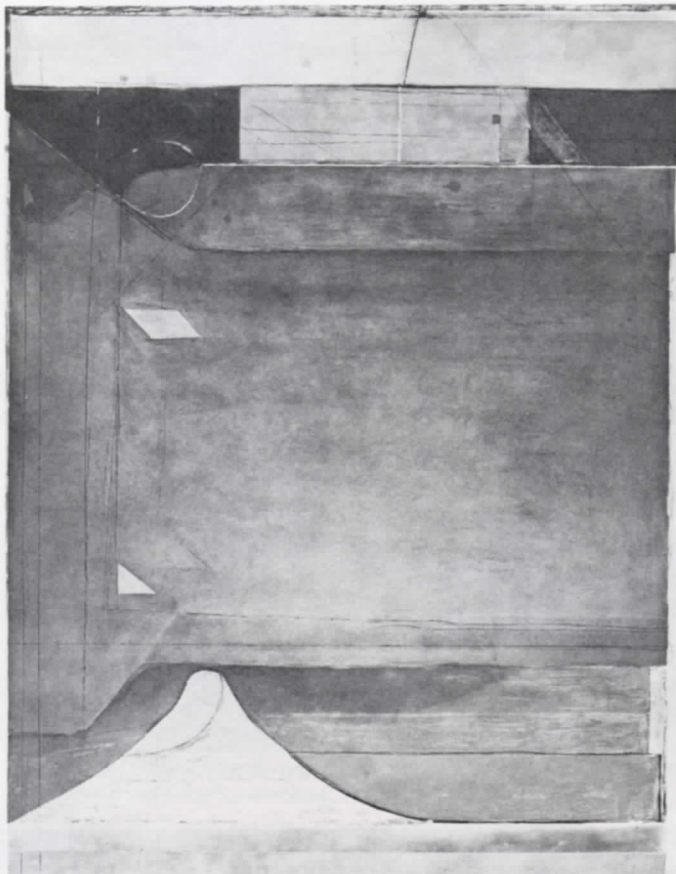
**WD:** So, there probably are a lot of things the artist might not even be able to think of, like plate order.

**KB:** There may be something that can be done that they don't know about. But first, we have to figure out what's wrong and it's terribly dangerous for us to try to guess at that. We have to get the artist to tell us. It's so easy to think that we might know and we usually don't; the artist has a lot more experience than we do in judging if his work is working or not and why.

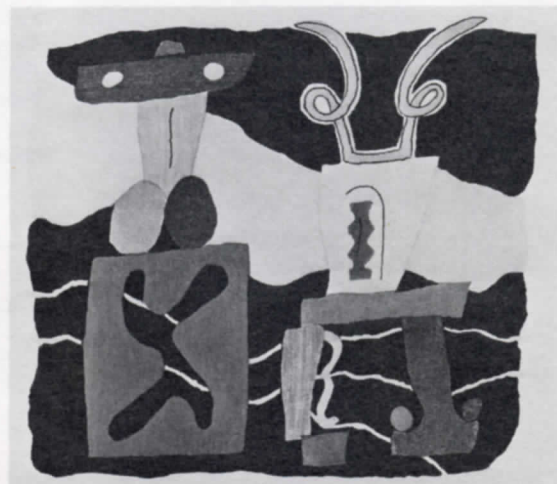
**WD:** So, it's really a matter of getting them to be able to articulate what they're sensing. Rather than suggesting what you think.

**KB:** It very occasionally happens that an artist thinks a print is terrific and we all think it's awful. (laughter)

**WD:** And then what happens?



Richard Diebenkorn, *Green*, 1986. Spitbite, aquatint, drypoint and soap-ground etching, 53½ x 41½", edition 60.



William Brice, *Untitled #4 (pattern)*, 1985. Aquatint, hard-ground and soft-ground etching, 16 x 16½", edition 25.



**KB:** I usually sort of delicately try to skirt around it, and see if I think he or she really thinks it's terrific.

**WD:** Or maybe a night sleeping on it and coming in the next day.

**KB:** But, if that ever really happens we let it go. We go ahead and do it anyway, because maybe it is terrific and we can't see it yet.

**WD:** I was reading something today that said that being a printer, is something like being a translator, where you have to be a poet as well as knowing the words. And I don't know if I completely agree with that. What do you think about that?

**LH:** We don't translate, really; the artist does that. We have to get a good idea what the artist has as his final goal and then basically give him the option of a number of different ways to get there.

**WD:** Do you always try to give him more than one option on how to get something?

**MB:** Yes, if it's applicable. I should amend what Larry's saying because he's talking about understanding what the artist is trying to get, and at the same time we know the artist is trying to understand what the printer's got to offer. The understanding that we have of etching is something that we're trying to teach or transfer to the artist's ability to

manipulate better the medium, to use this medium for his art. That's where the translation comes in. Because, we've spent all of our time developing the skill to print things, whichever way an artist wants.

**WD:** So it's like a menu.

**MB:** Yes, it's a menu in a way.

**KB:** But, it's also saying perhaps, the pork's a little better than the beef, if you like pork.

**WD:** So it's a gentle guiding.

**KB:** It's a certain amount of guidance, but we try and keep it very light because we want to learn something ourselves. We learn every single time an artist works here. If we didn't, I'd be very surprised and probably not so excited about continuing.

**WD:** When you think of the different projects we've done and how incredibly different their approaches to printmaking have been—from Robert Bechtle to Richard Diebenkorn to Rammellzee to John Cage burning paper on the press.

**MB:** That's really true, we learn about the medium from them, too. I hate to use the phrase "pushing the envelope," but it's appropriate. The artists would never be able to have their prints look the way they want them to look if they were set loose in a studio where there are printing facilities.

They don't have either the inclination or the necessity to devote the learning time to the skills that we have.

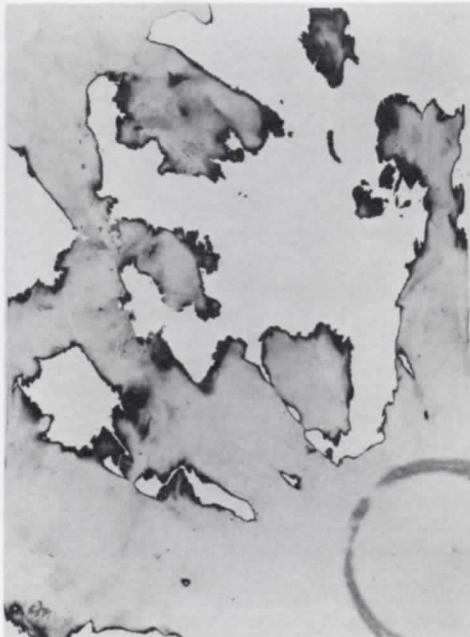
**WD:** And so they end up being able to make art that simply wouldn't exist if they didn't come and have access to the experience and skill that resides in this studio. And this work ends up being different from their paintings or whatever their normal medium is, although there is a clear relationship.

**KB:** It should be, it really is, an exploration for them. I think virtually every artist that's worked here has said in one way or another that they learned something they could take back to their other work, and at the same time, we've learned something, something personal, for ourselves, about ideas or art, and perhaps something technical too, that we can take on to other artists. It keeps snowballing.

**WD:** So, the whole thing starts with a mutual teaching and it ends with a mutual teaching.

**KB:** It grows, expands, and when it works it is, as one of the artists said to me, "enlightening" for us all.

Moderator: Wendy Diamond  
Assistant Director, Crown Point Press



John Cage, *Eninka #2*, 1986. One from a series of 50 monoprints on gampi paper with chine collé, 24 x 18".



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, *The Nut Trees*, 1985. Woodblock print with 19 blocks and 8 colors, 16½ x 23¼", edition 100.



## Dear Friends,

"Collaboration" seems to be something of a hot issue these days in the print world, and Wendy Diamond, the editor of this newsletter, pointed out to me that while the various articles in the Print Collector's Newsletter on this theme have been interesting in every case, none has been written by printers. She had the idea to interview our Crown Point printers and myself about what really goes on when an artist works in our etching studio in Oakland. I've always tried to avoid using the word "collaboration"; I know something happens when an artist works with us, but I'm not sure that's exactly the right word for it. What I think we do is create a situation in which "real" art can be made.

That this is a more delicate problem than might at first be apparent is clear from Wendy Diamond's interview, which you will find elsewhere in this issue. The day I read the interview I also read in the New York Times a news item titled "Moments of Peak Concentration Are Likened to Euphoric States of Mind." This described research by several different universities which shows that "instances of absorption" produce brain wave patterns similar to those of meditation and other "highs." A psychology professor at the University of Chicago calls this "flow"

and describes it as "those times when things seem to go just right, when you feel alive and fully attentive to what you are doing." It is also described as "mental efficiency experienced as a feeling of effortlessness." The studies were made on many people performing at their peak, from surgeons to chess masters. I've always known that an artist working well slips into another state—this is where the idea of the muses comes from—and I know too that when our studio situation works perfectly the printers are also within this "flow," and there's a fine feeling of "rolling along." I had thought, however, that when this "flow" occurred it was in spite of the technical frustrations inherent in printmaking.

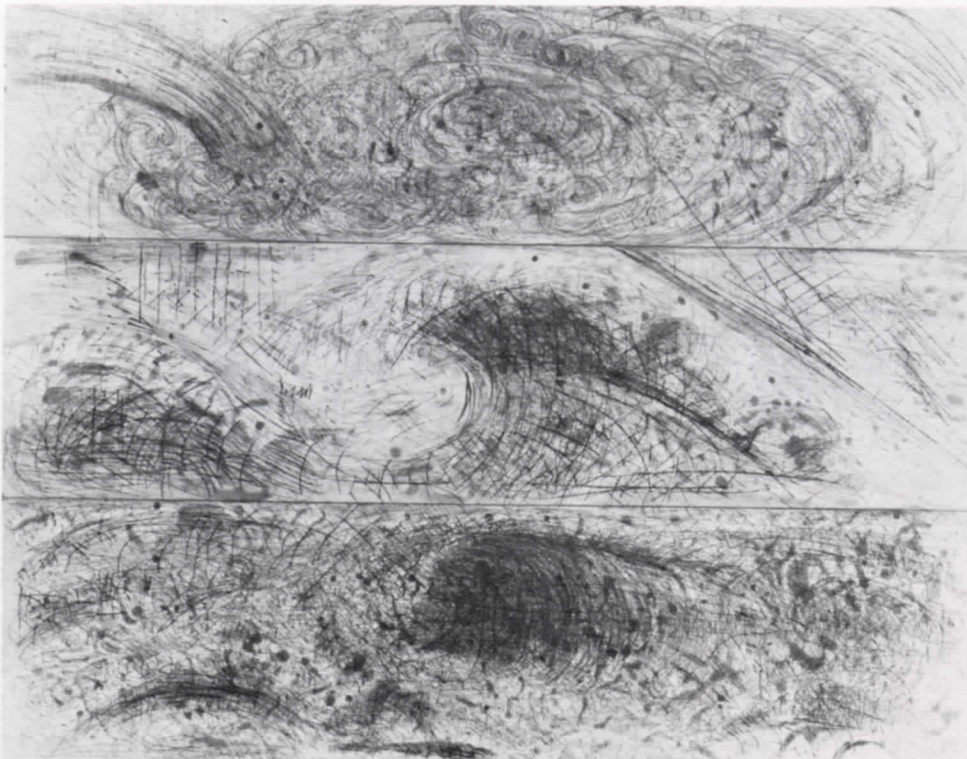
The surprise in reading the New York Times article is to discover that our ability to create this state may not be in spite of the difficulties of printmaking, but because of them.

"People seem to concentrate best when the demands on them are a bit greater than usual, and they are able to give more than usual," said one of the University of Chicago psychologists. "If there is too little demand on them, people are bored. If there is too much for them to handle, they get anxious.

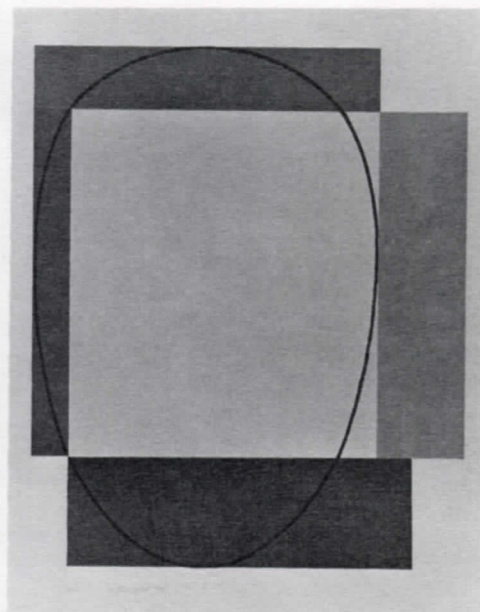
Flow occurs in that delicate zone between boredom and anxiety."

What we offer an artist is a little jolt, a way of being on the line outside the environment of his own studio, of feeling a little out of control, but nevertheless able to overcome that feeling and to extend—through the teaching, skills and goodwill of others—to new accomplishments beyond his own unaided capabilities. And the artist offers us a jolt too, as we summon all the skills and energies we can muster to keep up with him (her).

I'm sure some of you are wondering how our Japan program fits into this idea. Is it different? Yes, and no. When we started it I thought it was going to be more different than I think it is now. As the printers point out in their interview, in the etching studio the printers are not the translators of the work, the artist is. But in the Japan program the work is truly translated by the Japanese printer, and the artist must, in a foreign country, take the translation and work it around to being right, to being the artist's, rather than the translator's, work. The fact that the artist is in a foreign country using very distinctive traditional techniques is an important element—I don't believe we'd have the same  
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Pat Steir, *The Wave—From the Sea—After Leonardo, Hokusai, Courbet*, 1985. Spithbite, soapground, drypoint, hardground and softground etching, 43 x 54", edition 50.

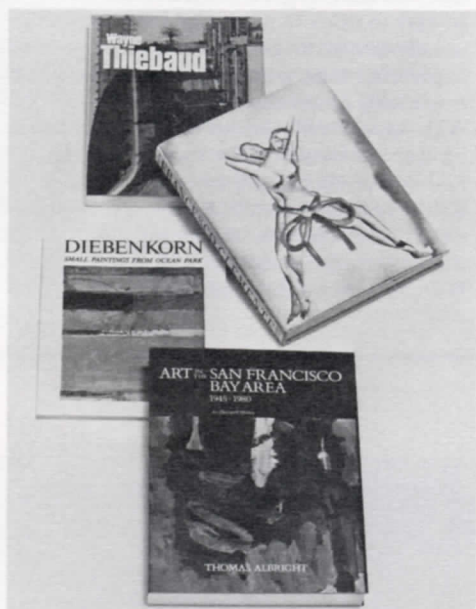


Robert Mangold, *Five Color Frame*, 1985. Woodblock print with 23 blocks and 10 colors, 25 x 21", edition 200.



## New Books

We'd like to introduce you to our book program, if you don't know about it already. We carry a number of books, catalogs and other materials about our artists as a way of letting people know more about their work. The books featured below are new and are particularly beautifully produced and informative. We also publish *VIEW*, an interview series which features one artist at a time talking about his or her work. We will be publishing two issues this spring—one on Tom Holland, and one on Günter Brus. All our publications are available at both gallery locations, and also by mail from the Oakland gallery. If you would like a complete list of our books, *VIEW* and everything else we carry, just send in the form.



- ☐ *Francesco Clemente*, by Michael Auping, published by the Ringling Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams. Hardcover, \$35.
- ☐ *Richard Diebenkorn, Small Paintings from Ocean Park*, essay by Dore Ashton and preface by George Neubert. Published by Hine Inc and Houston Fine Arts Press. Softcover, \$14.
- ☐ *Wayne Thiebaud*, by Karen Tsujimoto, published for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art by the University of Washington Press. Softcover, \$19.95.
- ☐ *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980, An Illustrated History*, by Thomas Albright, University of California Press. Softcover, \$29.50.
- ☐ Tom Holland *VIEW*, \$3.
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## Overview

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## Friends...

success if I brought the Japanese printer here. Another very important (and little noted) element in the situation is Hidekatsu Takada. He has worked as a printer at Crown Point in Oakland for nine years; he knows the subtleties of creating a good situation for making art, and he has been able to convey these to our Japanese associates, as well as to convey the desires and thoughts of the artists to the printer—and, not incidentally—to help us to understand and appreciate Japan.

As an afterthought, I'd like to let you know about something I've been working on that might interest those of you especially curious about how we work with artists. I have been videotaping some of the artists who've worked recently in Oakland. The tapes are turning out to be quite natural and intimate; somehow the printers and artist seem to forget that the camera is there after awhile, perhaps because I am the one holding it rather than someone who isn't an integral part of the situation. I'm doing the editing myself, keeping things simple—it's as if you were there, watching and listening. My first tape is of Richard Diebenkorn working on his new big etching, "Green," and it will be made in Beta and VHS format as well as for the larger "museum machines." Magee Sweed, an instructional videotape company in Seattle, will be distributing it. We hope to have it ready in June. This project is very exciting to me as it simply shows "collaboration" (if it is that) and (perhaps) lays to rest the need for further words on the subject. I'll keep you posted as other tapes develop.

All best regards,

Kathan Brown  
Director, Crown Point Press

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