

# Overview



Pat Steir, *Wind and Water*, 1996. Color soap ground aquatint with soap ground aquatint reversal, spit bite aquatint and drypoint. Paper size: 44 x 43 3/4"; image size: 36 x 36". Edition 35.

## Abstract or Figurative? (And Does It Matter?)

This month, Crown Point Press is releasing new etchings by Pat Steir and William Bailey, two artists who seem quite different from one another. Steir, in making her current work, throws paint at a canvas, while Bailey paints with fine brushes delineating rows of pots, pitchers and vases. "Abstract!" we say of Steir, rushing to the pigeonholes. And Bailey is clearly figurative.

And yet, in speaking with these artists, I have come away with the crazy idea that the situation is reversed: Steir is a figurative artist, Bailey an abstract one. Look at their titles: Steir's etching, illustrated on this page, is, the title says, wind and water. Bailey's, shown on page 5, bears the name of a province of Italy. Steir's title asks us to

assemble in our minds an image of something we know, a waterfall, with water swirling and splashing against rocks. Bailey's title is not so specific. It sets a mood, nothing more. Steir began with her title—*Wind and Water*—at least in a general way, while Bailey titled his print after having completely finished it, by looking at it and trying to put a name to its emanations. He talks about transcendence as his goal, while Steir speaks of a gesture of the body as food for the mind.

At the Museum of Modern Art's great Mondrian exhibition this year in New York, I bought a little book written by Mondrian in 1919 called *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. In it, Mondrian speaks of his painting as "abstract real" and explains that "esthetic contemplation affords mankind a means of uniting with the universal in an

abstract, that is to say, conscious, way." This can happen only when "particular, individual feelings are not involved," he says. "That is why the new art excludes them." Another great show, on at the same time at the National Gallery in Washington D.C., showed Vermeer three centuries earlier depicting in clear and moving detail the realities of particular human beings and their environments. No wonder that this year we are anxiously pigeonholing artists as abstract or figurative! And two other recent shows settled the trend. One, about figuration, was held at last summer's Venice Biennale, and the other, about abstraction, is currently at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

I did not see those exhibitions, but I read their catalogs. Both exhibitions attempted historical surveys of their sub-

jects, and both were huge, in numbers of works and in scope, ambition, and importance. The books, too, are big—physically and mentally heavy. The one from Venice is titled *Identity and Alterity, Figures of the Body 1895/1995*, and its introductory essay by the show's director Jean Clair begins with the invention of cinema in 1895. "The unique interior lustre of an individual work is replaced by the flickering and dazzle of an image snatched out of our sight twenty-four times a second," he says, and goes on to roam through the development of the modern world, scientifically and philosophically. "Man is not contained in his body," he concludes, crediting Freud with "reinstating the grandeur of a...powerful, dark and perpetually unknowable soul."

The best part of Jean Clair's essay for me was his pointing out the interest of artists around the turn of the century in early printed reproductions of photographs taken at the Salpêtrière, France's famous insane asylum. Those pictures undermined classical ideas of the body. Clair carries this line of interest straight to contemporary artist Louise Bourgeois, and I think perhaps picturing hysteria is the underlying theme of his show. One of his stars is the English artist Francis Bacon, whose portraits, Jean Clair says, "reflect that butchery which fills the stomach of modern cities." Francis Bacon was just beginning to exhibit when I was a student in London in the mid-1950s, and my friends and I thought his art old-fashioned. We were impressed by the directness of Jackson Pollock, and we thought Bacon was using cheap tricks to manipulate his viewer's emotions. I see now that Bacon is part of a stream, still moving strongly and populated by those powerful dark souls Freud generated. The flickering cinema and other inventions Clair speaks of were headwaters of another, more modern stream.

The modern stream is explored by Mark Rosenthal in the Guggenheim show, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*. I really enjoyed reading the catalog, and heartily recommend it as a quick art history fix. There are lots of direct quotes from artists, and Rosenthal struggles to fit the artists' views of what they are doing into his own view of abstraction. His failure to do that with many of the living artists he has included becomes evident on the last two pages of

his essay. He has written a wonderful passage about "the physical character of a work of art as an end in itself," a notion expressed by many artists he has quoted, particularly Minimal artists like Robert Ryman. And then he ruins it by adding that "abstraction has a powerful capacity for liberating an individual's self-expression." He seems to think that artists want to "convey" an individual message, a "sense of self".

I believe that most of the celebrated artists of our time, especially the ones discussed in Rosenthal's book, would deny that self-expression is their intention in making art. Artists realize that something of the self always comes through, but they know taste is limiting and do their best to step outside themselves. Abstraction is one of the strategies they have devised to help them do that. Figuration—which traditionally means using illusion to connect images with the world's reality—is another. Rosenthal ends his essay by saying abstraction "survives best as a cause." I don't think it's a cause. I think it's a possibility.

Traditionally, artists have chosen the strategy of abstraction if their primary goal is capturing transcendence or truth, and they have chosen figuration if examination and documentation of the world is their first concern (though they may have truth as an ultimate goal). But sometime soon after the end of World War II the two strategies began to blur. Pollock used gestures of his body to produce paintings that are without question abstract and anti-illusionist, and—in the early 1960s—Günter Brus, part of a group in Vienna grieving over the war, painted his body white and wrapped it in bandages and rags. His art was without question figurative, but dealt abstractly with truth and was, unlike previous figurative art, anti-illusionist. Brus was featured in the Venice show about figuration, as was Joseph Beuys, the influential German artist who worked with unusual materials such as fat and felt, using them concretely to release their symbolic characters.

Beuys is also a part of the Guggenheim show about abstraction. Although his work is concerned with the real, many pieces look abstract, and he is one of a large number of artists in the catalog who are not abstractionists but realists of the anti-illusionist variety. I would include in

this group Gerhard Richter and Richard Long, who are featured in the exhibition. They and other included artists actually undermine the idea of abstract art. Daniel Buren, whose work involves using stripes to frame fragments of the actual world, is an example, as is Walter de Maria who has installed poles in a field to attract lightning. Some abstract artists who are critical of abstraction, Rosenthal says in speaking of Buren, are "loosely associated with Conceptualism" and he vaguely lays their behavior at the feet of "European Marxists who held abstraction in contempt because it failed to deal with the inequalities of life." I don't think that's it.

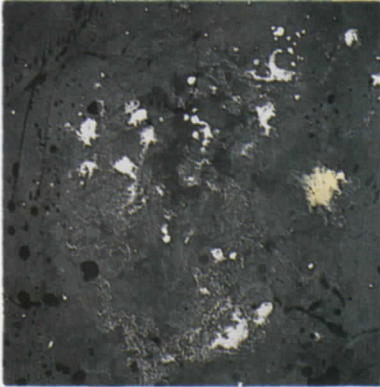
I think that Beuys, Richter, Long, Buren and de Maria are unequivocally Conceptual artists, and Conceptual art is an art of the real. It is concerned with its relationship to life, and is dependent on individual viewers to complete the art in their own heads. It is the opposite of abstraction, whose basic principles are described by Rosenthal as "purity of form independent of the world of appearances, compositional unity and balance, universality, and unfettered creative freedom." Universality and unfettered creative freedom could apply to any art, but the other two principles are not comfortable for Conceptual artists and the younger, so-called "Postmodern" artists influenced by them. Even if artists produce art that looks abstract, like Buren's stripes or de Maria's poles, their intentions may not be connected to the tenets of abstraction, and their work, consequently, is not abstract.

Rosenthal describes Conceptual art as "essentially an extension of Minimalism." That's true in some ways, but there was a big change between the two movements, mainly because Minimal artists work abstractly, and Conceptual artists (and many Postmodern artists who followed them) do not. The extensions of Minimalism are in the use of material for its own sake in Conceptual art (some Minimal artists did this, but not all), and in attitudes toward medium and style. Minimal artists in general have said they are disinterested in those things. But Conceptual artists have gone so far as to say any medium, image, or style can be used to pursue an idea. They frequently flip from one style, type of image, or medium to another, so are hard

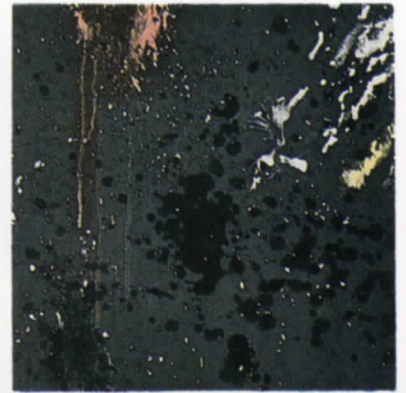
(continued on page 5)

**Pat Steir: *Starry Nights*, 1996**

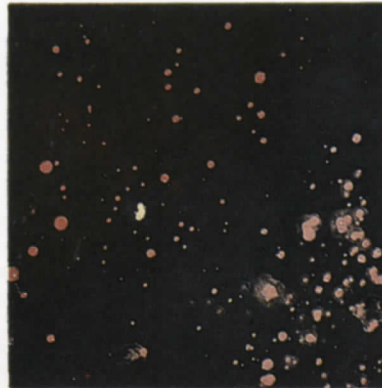
A set of five color soap ground aquatints, some with spit bite aquatint and aquatint.  
Paper size: 27 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 25 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Edition 40.



*Starry Nights: June*, Image size: 18 x 18".



*Starry Nights: July*, Image size: 18 x 18".



*Starry Nights: September*, Image size: 18 x 18".



*Starry Nights: August*, Image size: 20 x 18".

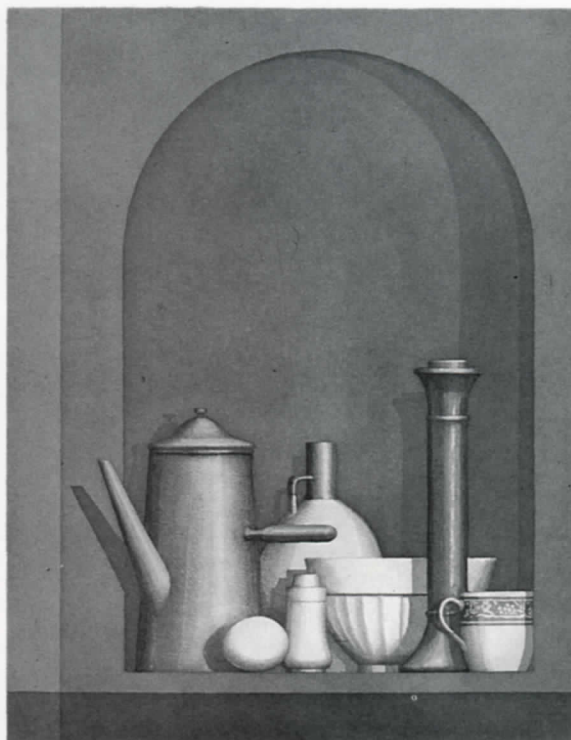


*Starry Nights: October*, Image size: 20 x 18".

## William Bailey: *New Editions*



William Bailey, *Borghetto II*, 1996.  
Hard ground etching printed in brown.  
Paper size: 15¼ x 16"; image size: 7 x 8".  
Edition 15.



William Bailey, *Monte Pulciano*, 1996. Aquatint with hard ground etching.  
Paper size: 30 x 24"; image size: 19¾ x 15¾". Edition 25.



William Bailey, *La Notte*, 1996.  
Hard ground etching with aquatint.  
Paper size: 15¼ x 15½";  
image size: 7 x 8". Edition 25.



William Bailey, *Borghetto I*, 1996.  
Color aquatint with hard ground etching.  
Paper size: 15¼ x 16"; image size: 7 x 8".  
Edition 35.

### In the San Francisco Gallery

May 1 - June 9, 1996

**William Bailey** and **Pat Steir**:  
New Editions

The gallery is open Tuesday - Saturday 10-6  
and every Thursday evening until 8.

**In New York:** Karen McCready, Crown  
Point Press East Coast Representative, will  
be showing our new editions by appoint-  
ment. Please call her at (212) 677-3732.

**Crown Point's summer workshops** in  
etching and photogravure are scheduled for

June 24 - 29, July 8 - 13 and 15 - 20.  
Please call or write for a brochure.

**Watch your mail** for an announcement  
about the Crown Point Press **Seasons Club**.  
To be a member you must enroll or renew  
no later than July 31, 1996.



William Bailey, *Umbria Verde*, 1996. Color aquatint with hard ground etching. Paper size: 24 x 27"; image size: 13 1/8 x 17 1/8". Edition 50.

(Abstract or Figurative? continued)

to categorize, and hard to predict. Their activities helped cause the notion of progress in art to be abandoned. Artists want to push the great ongoing enterprise of art into new places, but they no longer see their work as taking the "next" historic step. They are more likely to say they are searching for truth.

Searching for truth, however, is not the same thing as being divine agents, as Rosenthal implies abstractionists to be, knowing the truth and trying to "convey" it to others. Like creative people in all fields, artists (perhaps even abstractionists) believe what they are doing is research. Rosenthal, at least twice in his text, quotes artists quoting John Cage speaking of his desire to embody "nothing." Cage believed that self-expression is "trivial and lacking in urgency." He wanted to do something useful, to try to find a way to be in the world that others, from his work's example, could grasp and expand for themselves. "Nothing is accomplished by this piece of music," Cage once said, "But our ears are now in excellent condition."

Cage's work, a critic wrote, undermines the philosophy of the Enlightenment, a philosophy founded in the eighteenth century on the ideas of Hegel about thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, a philosophy of historical unfolding that finds progress rational, and reason—or logic—the basis for

world process. Freud was a part of this great train of thought, as was Marx and the philosophers of existentialism. Joan Retallack, whose wonderful book, *Cage Muses on Music, Art, Words* was published this year, says Cage worked with "questions and procedures in an atmosphere of values" rather than "having one step lead to (or justify or foreshadow) another." Thinking about it this way, we can see the work of a great many artists of our time as undermining the Enlightenment.

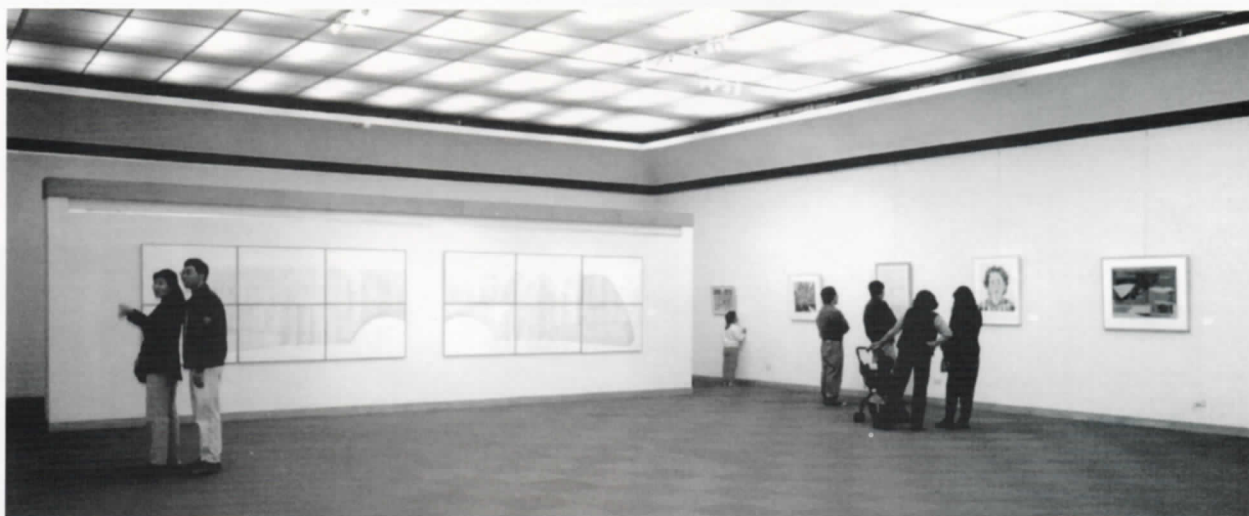
Pat Steir and William Bailey are two of them. "Cage put a bell jar over chaos and for a time I wanted to do the same thing," Steir has said. "Then I realized that each of us imposes order simply by the way we see. In the universe, since all things are placed in it equally, we really pick our own foreground and background." She has made the point in many of her works that marks can coalesce to create images, or they can be seen individually as marks. Bailey's still lives are very different but, like Steir's work they are not about relationships observed and then reported or abstracted. "I'm painting a world that's not around us," he says, adding that he searches for something "intimate that can also be monumental." These are images not made to manipulate our emotions, but to explore generalized, recognizable forms in very specific, differentiated ways. Learning moves from the indefinite to the definite,

through trial and error, and this is the way Bailey approaches his art. Studying the work of either of these artists leaves our eyes in excellent condition.

E. H. Gombrich says in *Art and Illusion*, an influential book he wrote in 1956, that in the modern world art has been thought to willfully push forward or "express" the spirit of an age, or a people, while in the middle ages art was considered a meditation on spirituality. He points out that fascism and communism held convictions that mankind is evolving to a super race or a super class, and says the idea of progress, in that sense, is dead. Organisms do not progress, but rather they test and probe their environment, moving from the general to the specific. Artists in our developing postmodern world have begun to take that approach as well, and in doing so some of them have arrived at something like spirituality.

The reason it doesn't matter to many contemporary artists whether their work is called abstract or figurative is that their art is not expressed or willed, but rather is developed, explored, discovered. It comes out of the world, as figuration does, but, like abstraction, it searches for values, truth, and transcendence. We are in a time of major upheaval. Art can help us orient ourselves and prepare for the future.

—Kathan Brown



An Installation View of *Master Printers and Master Pieces* at the Kaohsiung Museum in Taiwan, showing Vito Acconci's *Two Wings for Wall and Person* (center) and at far right prints by Al Held and Chuck Close. The large exhibition features prints from Crown Point Press, San Francisco, Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles, and The Printmaking Workshop, New York City. It is on view through May, 1996.

### Exhibitions of Special Interest

New work by **Vito Acconci** will be shown at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, through June.

**Christopher Brown's** traveling show of works on paper will start its tour at The Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, through May 13. The show then travels to the Fisher Gallery, Los Angeles, September through October, and ends at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota, in the winter of 1997.

The Institute de Arte Moderno, Valencia, Spain, will show work by **Francesco Clemente** from September through October.

**Chuck Close's** work is showing at the Art Institute of Chicago from April 27 through July 28.

**Hamish Fulton's** work at John Weber, New York, will be on view through May 18.

Acquavella Contemporary Art, New York, will show figurative drawings by **Richard Diebenkorn** through May 23.

**Al Held** will show new work at Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York, from April 4 through May 11.

An installation and show of drawings by **Joan Jonas** is at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, California, from April 27 through June 1.

**Anish Kapoor's** work will show at Massimo Minini Gallery, Brescia, Italy, from March 22 through May 20.

**Alex Katz's** new work is at Marlborough Gallery from April 17 through May 11.

**Alex Katz: Under the Stars: American Landscapes, 1951 - 1995** will show at the Baltimore Museum of Art from June 10 through August 8. A permanent exhibit of Katz's work will be at the Colby College Museum of Art, Colby College, Maine, beginning in October.

**Sol LeWitt's** retrospective of prints is at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through May 7.

**Tom Marioni's** show, "Elegant Solutions", is at Paule Anglim Gallery, San Francisco, from April 10 through May 4.

The Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California presents "Thiebaud Selects Thiebaud: A Forty-year Survey from Private Collections" from April 21 through August 4.

**Wayne Thiebaud** has received the Gold Medal Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts from the National Arts Club in New York.

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