



Brad Brown, *Textbook Comic Devices*, 2001. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with drypoint and Hoshio paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 30-1/2 x 37-1/4"; image size: 23-1/2 x 30-3/4". Edition 10. Printed by Case Hudson.

Brad Brown

Textbook Comic Devices and Tender Jokes

When Brad Brown did his first project at Crown Point Press in 1999, he made two prints each containing eight separate images on the same sheet. By rearranging the plates that made up the images, he produced not editions but series of unique prints. This work related to collections of drawings he had been doing in his own studio for about fifteen years, cutting them up, marking and remarking them, and arranging and rearranging them into large wall installations collectively titled *The Look Stains*. He had the idea that he would always keep these drawings, re-use and re-cut them at will, and continue to add to them. Although his print project and a few other self-contained bodies of work were available for sale, his major drawing installations were not. He would rent them but not sell them.

Brown told me he thought of *The Look Stains* project as a circle, and believed it would be cyclical and endless. "My mind was made up about it, because that structure was my greatest joy," he explained. "But I woke up one day and thought I was burying myself in that work. It seemed cumbersome and heavy. In the end I just changed my mind about how to approach my work, and I started to see it as a line, with discreet pieces."

At that point, before he had done anything more in his studio, the time set aside for him to work at Crown Point arrived. The first few days were a struggle. He started as he had before, working on large plates that he cut into fragments. But these fragments were not interchangeable as they had been in the earlier prints. Brown set the plates out in a structure based on a scene in an early Buster Keaton film. In the film, two men are suitors for the same woman, and they are driving in their cars side by side. Keaton's car is a jalopy, and the other guy has a sports car. As the camera shoots Keaton's car head-on, a bump in the road makes it fall apart, piece by piece. The wheels wobble, the doors come off, other parts come off, but it all stays in the frame. Keaton rides the collapsing heap till he's left standing with nothing but the steering wheel. "I loved the idea of something fragmented that stays visually whole, and I played that scene over and over in slow motion from my VCR," Brown said.

The Buster Keaton scene, to Brown, is a "textbook comic device," and he named the large print for it. The scene has become a model, he said, for structuring comedy—and it is based on something sad. Brown recalled the title of a book he had read: "Comedy is a Man in Trouble."



Brad Brown, *Tender Jokes*, 2001. Portfolio of nine color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with soft ground etching. Paper size: 5-3/4 x 5-1/2"; image size: 4-1/2 x 4-1/2 ". Edition 20. Printed by Case Hudson.

The print, *Textbook Comic Devices*, is made up of fragments of drawings on fragments of plates. To unify everything, Brown added shapes that he cut out of paper and glued to each print as it was being printed, using the *chine collé* process. Brown cut all the shapes himself, individually (not in stacks), but he cut them more-or-less the same for each print. He sees the *chine collé* material as contributing a quality of light that he gets in his drawings by using a brush loaded with oil.

For eight days of the ten he worked with us, he was focused on the big print. Then he began to cut up a lot of plates that he had made but not used—he called them strays. He cut them into same-sized plates and printed them one over the other, mostly in different colors, until "something visually interesting happened." He has put

these little prints into a neat little box and called them *Tender Jokes*. He says he is using the word "tender" here with two meanings: vulnerable, and caring. He rescued these images from the scrap pile, caring for them. And now that they have settled into forms, they are going to stay that way and not change any more.

Brown tells me that now, after making the prints, he has been working in something like the same way in his studio with the fragments of his *The Look Stains* work. He is moving the piles of drawings in his studio around, sorting through them, working over them, forming juxtapositions, and making discreet, finalized, works of art.

—Kathan Brown