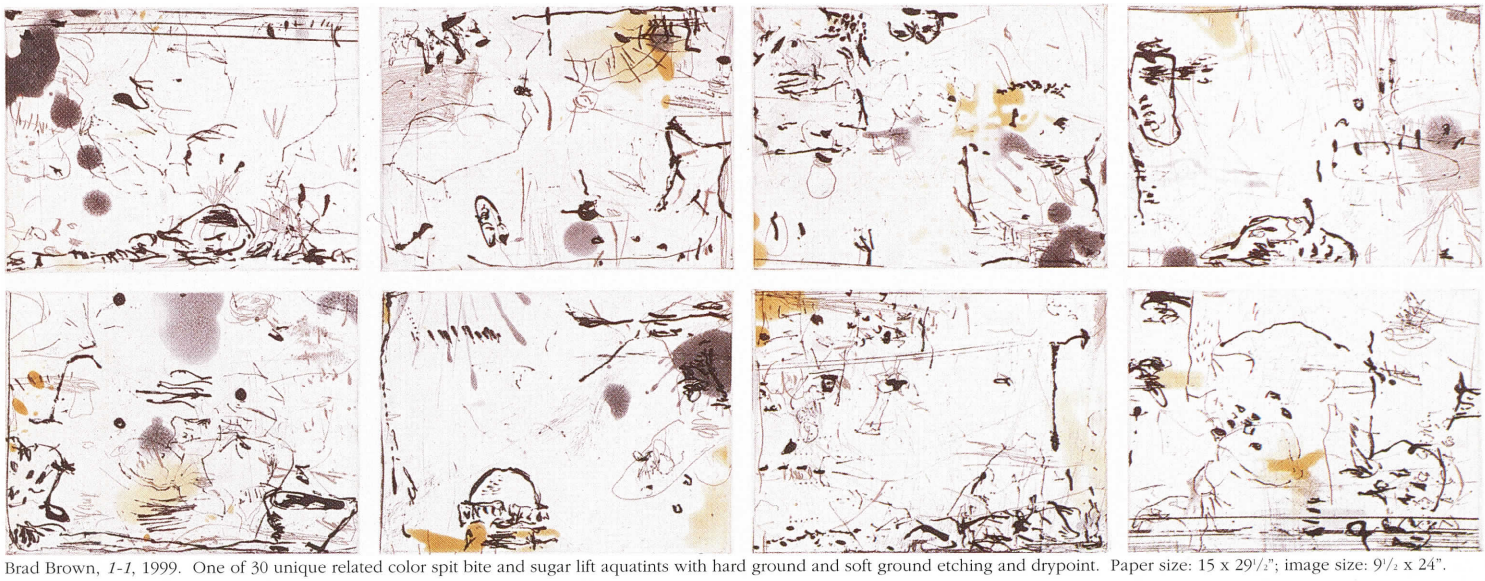
Crown Point Press
Newsletter
December 1999

Overview



Brad Brown, *1-1*, 1999. One of 30 unique related color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with hard ground and soft ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 15 x 29½"; image size: 9½ x 24". Printed by Case Hudson.

Brad Brown

Why is an Artwork Good?

Brad Brown, who was born in 1964, had his first one person exhibition five years ago in 1994 at the Southern Exposure alternative art space in San Francisco. Critic Jamie Brunson writing in *Art Issues* magazine, found that exhibition "a visual experience that restores one's belief in the transcendental possibilities of art." Kenneth Baker, writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, said it was "the most exciting contemporary drawing show to be seen in the Bay Area since the late Richard Diebenkorn's 1989 drawing retrospective." He added that the works "display a poise and freedom that comes to most artists, if ever, only after long experience."

I saw that exhibition, too. It must have been good, because I can still call it to mind. I've often wondered why some experiences, art and otherwise, imprint themselves on our brains and others fly, as they say, in one ear (or eye) and out the other. Probably a brain needs some experience, something preparatory, to allow a complicated aesthetic memory. But at the same time, if there is too much similar material already in there, "same old, same old" signals are sent and nothing much registers.

Of course, each person is differently prepared. How, then, can we have any kind of consensus? Brunson, Baker, and I were not the only art-world people who appreciated Brown's exhibition. There was a buzz. People talked about it—many saw it on recommendations of friends. (Valerie Wade, Crown Point's Gallery Director, recommended it to me.) Largely because of that show's strength, Brown's work has since been included in two drawing surveys at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and one at the Drawing Center in New York.

I want to consider here, using Brown as an example, two related questions: How can we pick out an artist's work and say it's good? And how does an artist get to the place where people do that? The poise and freedom that Baker mentioned are key to both answers. How did Brown come by them?

Brad Brown studied in the mid-eighties at Virginia Commonwealth University, moved to New York in 1986, and to San Francisco in 1989. As a student, he told me, he was "surrounded by nihilistic painting, coming out of punk. You were supposed to develop attitude. Everyone was posing. Everyone wanted to get rich and famous, but of course we hadn't done any work to get rich and famous with."

Susi Gablik, who wrote *Has Modernism Failed?* and, later, *The Re-Enchantment of Art*, came to the University for a temporary teaching job. Some of Brown's friends dismissed her ideas as "hippie stuff," but after an initial resistance, Brown remembers, he became "fully involved" with her class. Studying the approaches of Joseph Beuys, John Cage and others opened up for him the possibility of art that is "socially responsible, transformative, and magical," art that "changes daily life."

To generalize, I think that no matter how much natural talent a young artist has, if his or her work is to have lasting interest for others he must somehow be lifted from self-absorption into the wider world.

Often a small group of artist peers generates ideas and explorations among its members. Sometimes a teacher sets a student thinking. And sometimes solitary pursuits like reading and looking are what thrust an artist into the world of ideas. In Brown's case, it seems to have been a combination of a teacher's influence and his own solitary pursuits. He moved to New York mainly in order to study the art in its great museums.

Like many other artists of his generation, he found a studio in Brooklyn. "I took a stack of drawings with me," he recalls. "I don't know why I chose those particular ones, but for some reason I had a stack under my arm when I got there. Of course, I was broke, and couldn't afford art supplies. One day I folded one of the drawings into sections and tore it up, and started drawing over what was already there. And I thought, This is rich and interesting and suggests another way of doing things."

That was how Brad Brown stepped into his approach to his art. Others, of course, have done it differently, possibly less concisely. But I think, in general, before an artist's work becomes good some kind of conscious step is taken that gives it a direction.

Brown's step was in 1987, and marked the beginning of *The Look Stains* project, now several thousand drawings strong. He expects

this project to continue for the rest of his life, and to remain always unfinished. He will not sell any of the drawings that are a part of it.

"I have heaps of drawings and they are underfoot and in the way, so they are being marked even when I'm not consciously working on them. Sometimes I use a drawing as a drop cloth or a palette for another, and sometimes my oil medium or something else drips or spills and stains a bunch of them. Ultimately I decide whether an incidental mark stays or goes. I can get rid of it, erase it, draw over it, and it's finally a visual decision. But I want all aspects of the process to be visible, and walking around the studio and stepping on things is part of the process."

Whenever Brown feels like it, he takes a clean sheet of paper, fairly large in size, and starts a new drawing. He dates it on the back, then begins making what he calls a "notation" of something that excites or engages him. "It could be a Tintoretto, or it could be from a comic strip, or maybe something I see in nature or around the house," he says. He is completely relaxed about this, knowing that eventually the drawing will be subsumed in the bigger project and will "loose relationship to the source."

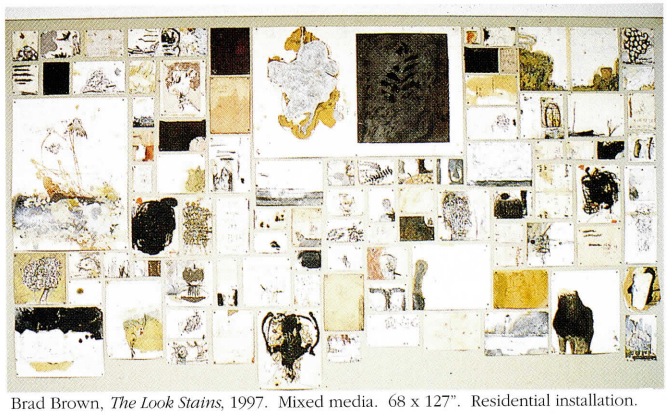
If a drawing is done with honesty, Brown believes, even if it is separated into parts each part will have integrity. He draws comfortably as a practice, knowing nothing he does is final, keeping his mind focused on the task at hand, on how it looks at each moment, not how it will look in the end. To him, the art comes out of active looking. As he works, forms come and go. He recognizes and isolates them, develops images, and sometimes puts an arrow on the back to indicate which side is up. His method keeps him from becoming attached to what he has done. And he does not worry about when to stop working and call a drawing finished.

"I was able to get rid of the big anxiety of searching for the end," he says. "When I get to the point that I don't want to draw on a work anymore, when it is that mature, I tear it up so I don't see it as finished. Then I date all those fragments with the history from the larger piece and also the date it was torn."

Brown does his tearing neatly in a grid-like system that yields smaller sheets in the same format as the work being torn. When he exhibits work from *The Look Stains* project, he combines small and large sheets tacked on the wall in irregular grids. After the show, the sheets are returned to the studio piles, perhaps to be worked on, perhaps to be used in another combination in another place.

Although he isn't willing to sell material from this body of work, he does rent it, going into a collector's home to make an installation to fit a particular space. "Renting the work allows me to remain true to my concept," Brown says. "And it allows the collector to live with it for awhile and then get the wall space back. So everybody's happy."

Before I talk about the work Brown does sell, including his prints, I'm going to stop here for a moment and make some more generalizations. Let's get back to my original questions about consensus. Why was Brown's show so good, and how did so many people, independently, know it was good?



Brad Brown, *The Look Stains*, 1997. Mixed media. 68 x 127". Residential installation.

Kenneth Baker's words "poise" and "freedom" precisely describe qualities that infuse good art, and I think it is recognition of those qualities that create a consensus about what is good. You need some experience to distinguish poise from cockiness and freedom from juvenile shenanigans, but lots of people can do it, enough people to create some real excitement when a good show comes along. There's another essential element, also, and that is surprise. If I'm surprised, and I have the feeling the artist is surprised too—his or her delight is somehow visible—then that's a good show.

What most artists do, I think, is set up their work routine in a way they hope will allow constant practice, to get good at their craft, and at the same time to find surprise. Brad Brown's method of working is more considered than most, but it is actually not original or surprising in itself. It works for him, though. His devotion

Brad Brown, *2-1*, 1999. One of 30 unique related color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with hard ground and soft ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 15 x 29½"; image size: 9½ x 24". Pritned by Case Hudson.

to his method has given him freedom. His philosophy is for him, not us. It's how he gets his poise.

"At some point I was interested in being a good draftsman, in being able to make seductive drawings," he told me, and added that he doesn't think about that anymore. My take is that he accomplished his goal by letting go of it—seductive drawing is exactly what he does. That's the pleasure of it for the viewer.

In addition to the ongoing and ever changing drawings that make up *The Look Stains* project, Brown does what he calls discrete works, and these can be sold. In order to approach them with the same confidence he finds in working on *The Look Stains* he sets up parameters ahead of time. He is working presently on forty sheets of paper with forty charcoal pencils, for example, and he will work until the pencils are used up.

Over the past few years Brown has done several residency projects, in which he has been invited to spend a particular amount of time working in a particular place. The Headlands in Marin County, where he worked for three months in 1997, is one of those residencies. Crown Point Press is another. In a residency project there is a natural frame, Brown says. "I don't have to decide if a work is finished. When the last day comes, that's it."

How to stop is taken care of. How to start may require a system. For the Headlands works, Brown threw dice to determine which of sixty-six drawings to work on each day, and which of twelve types of marks to use.

At Crown Point, he also used dice, first to choose from a pool of pictures cut from newspapers, and later to settle on whether to pour, paint, drip, or blow the acid to make marks on a plate. The newspaper pictures were guides for the first images he drew. "These will be lost," he said. "But it's a way of getting something on the plate without being self-conscious."

He started with soft ground, drawing on paper covering a large plate coated with a soft wax. Most artists draw with a pencil so they can see what they are doing, but Brown used a tool that did not make a visible mark as he was drawing. After the plate was etched and proofed, he drew on it again using other processes, and finally cut it (the plate) into sixteen equal-sized pieces.

During the week he spent with us he tried out all the processes usually used in etching, and made six large plates, one of them drawn on the back of an old plate so there were already accidental marks. He cut up all the plates after working on them, and eventually

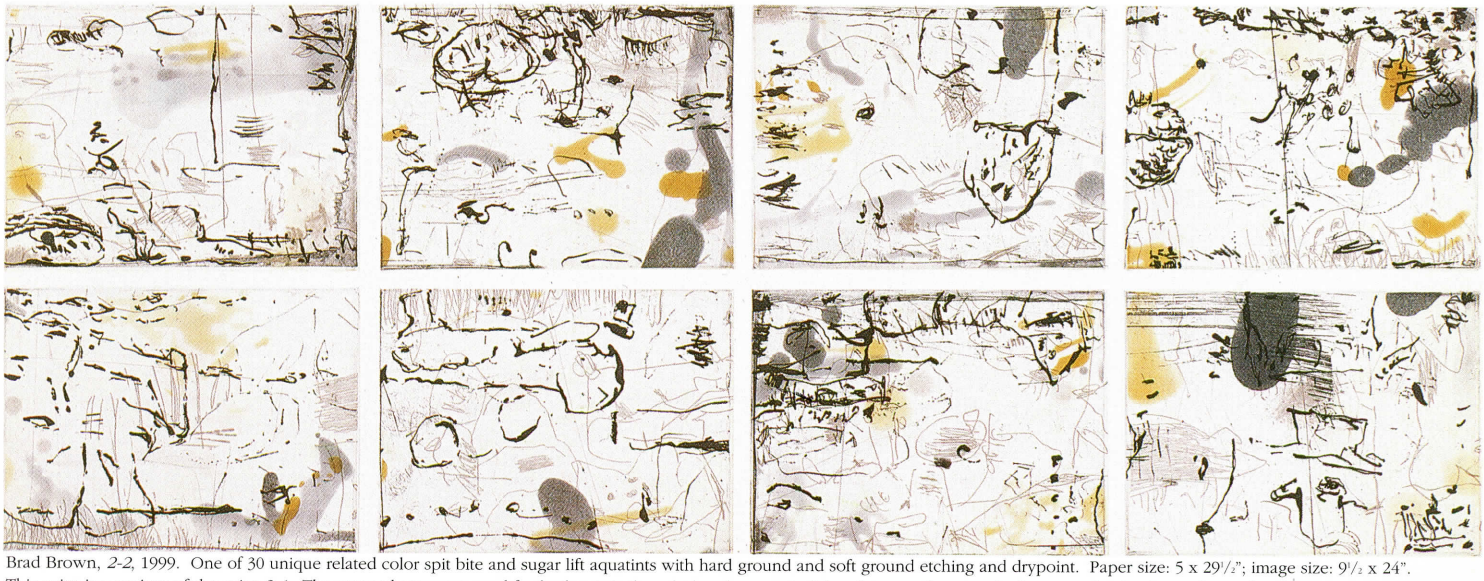
Brad Brown in the Crown Point studio, October 1999.

discarded one because the marks he had made on it were too strong and overwhelmed everything else.

The fragments of the remaining five make five layers in the prints—two black, two sepia and one yellow ochre—printed on top of one another. He did most of the drawing before cutting up the plates, but freely added to the fragments whenever he felt like it.

"It takes longer with the drawings to get them as rich as these little pieces," he said on the last day. "But it wasn't till midnight last night that I got a sense of what we'd done."

"How did you do that? How did you get that sense?" I asked him. "I just saw it," he replied with a laugh. After he saw it, he



Brad Brown, *2-2*, 1999. One of 30 unique related color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with hard ground and soft ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 5 x 29½"; image size: 9½ x 24". This print is a variant of the print *2-1*. The same plates were used for both prints though the placement of the plates on the press bed was randomly chosen for each print.

refined the colors and decided there would be two images, and that he would use half the plates for each. He pulled out the denser-looking plates to use for one print, leaving the more open ones for the other. And he set out a plan for printing that would produce a series of unique works rather than two set editions.

Each print requires five runs through the press and has forty plates, with two rows of four in each run. The plates in each run stay together, always the same color. But within each run, the plate positions migrate. Brown asked the printers to put the plates down on the press randomly, even upside down. Consequently, no two of the prints are alike, though they certainly are related.

Were these prints composed by chance, or by the artist? How does Brown's process compare with that of John Cage, whose ideas have influenced him? I would say that in Brown's case, the art is composed by him, with chance having an effect on the art but not a defining one. Cage would do tests to be sure his chance-derived systems would produce visually interesting work, but once he had determined his plan he was rigorous in following it. His intention was to "imitate nature in her manner of operation" and his reason for using chance was to deflect his own taste.

Brown's reason for using chance is different. It provides flexibility for him, allows him to avoid aiming for, and becoming attached to, a finished product. It keeps him from being self-conscious as he works. But ultimately his decisions are visual, and reveal his artist's eye, his taste. Fortunately, his taste is spirited and interesting.

"Cage is always in my mind," Brown said to me. "But so is de Kooning." I laughed aloud at this, remembering Cage's story of an argument he once had with de Kooning in a restaurant. There were bread crumbs on the paper-covered table and, drawing a line around them, de Kooning said, "That isn't art."

"But," Cage explained to us, long ago at Crown Point Press, "I would say that it was." In Cage's eyes, de Kooning had made the bread crumbs art by selecting them and framing them, but in de Kooning's eyes he had made a point, not art. I had laughed at Brown's pairing of Cage and de Kooning because to me the two are essentially incompatible.

Yet Brown has youthfully adapted them both to his own ends, even integrated their ideas in some peculiar way. There are a tremendous number of ideas out there, and in our present society people find and use them differently from how my generation learned to pursue knowledge. Ideas come to us now in bits and pieces. We don't feel much need for background and rumination. We just select the ones we like and use them the way we want to.

This can be a danger—a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. But some young people like Brad Brown are making art, good art, by forming disparate ideas into something positive and culturally responsible, maybe even—to use Brown's word—transformative. I think this is a hopeful sign for the way the world is going.

—Kathan Brown

Notes

San Francisco

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Through January 8, 2000.

Why Draw a Landscape?, etchings by Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Jane Freilicher, Pat Steir, Ed Ruscha, Robert Bechtle, Tom Marioni, David Nash, Bryan Hunt, April Gornik, Joan Nelson and Anne Appleby, along with a unique work by each artist.

Brad Brown: New Etchings and an Installation from *The Look Stains*

Please join us for a reception for the artists, and a booksigning for **Why Draw a Landscape?** by Kathan Brown, Thursday, December 9, from 6-8 p.m.

New York

Karen McCready, Crown Point Press East Coast Representative, will be showing **Why Draw a Landscape?** through November 30.

Exhibitions of Special Interest

Tom Marioni: Trees and Birds, Drawings 1969-1999, curated by Marcia Tanner. At Mills College Art Museum, Oakland, California November 10 - December 23.

Clemente: A Retrospective, at the Guggenheim Museum (Uptown), New York, through January 3, 2000.

Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective will be on exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, February 19, 1999 - May 21, 2000.

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