

Christopher Brown

Christopher Brown was born in 1951, and lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. "In a broad sense, all my paintings are about personal or collective memory," he has said. Although he has exhibited since 1977 in San Francisco, Chicago and other American cities, his first one person show in New York was in 1992 at the Edward Thorp Gallery. In that show, he presented several paintings which define themes he has explored also in his work in printmaking.

One of the paintings was titled *The Century Turning* and showed people milling around in a shadowed street with a bright spot of sun falling on the foreground. Another, *Tanager*, was a large close-up bird behind drooping flower buds. And a third was of pears, softly painted in a dense cluster on a tree. Several other paintings showed ice skaters and were quite abstract, large figure eights pressing up against the picture plane, one with only the feet of the skaters visible around it. And, in addition, there were two paintings of nineteenth century figures wearing huge ruffs around their necks.

Forty Flakes, part of the first group of etchings Brown made at Crown Point Press, is formally similar to one of the large ruff paintings, called *Spanish Turn*. In the painting, running shadowy figures haunt the background, and on another plane at the front are falling pears. "The pears perform the function of providing a film between you and the image so that you cannot get into the painting in a conventional way. They also act as a metaphor. Ripe fruit falling was a reference to the defeat of the Spanish Armada, just before the reign of Philip IV. And the 'turn' in the title refers to the idea of the world turning," Brown said.

Forty Flakes shows ice skaters behind large falling snowflakes, which provide a kind of memory screen, like the pears in the painting. There is a feeling that the world has turned, or changed, yet the image is one that seems familiar to us. Brown grew up in the mid-west, and in 1990 when his mother sent him a picture of an ice skater he had drawn when he was five, he started working with images of skaters. "The ability of painting to combine memories of different times into one image, as we do in our minds, is one of the things I am involved in now—not simply what life looks like, but what our memory of life looks like," Brown said.

In the etching studio, Brown told me, he felt like an octopus, its tentacles reaching out, each arm taking a tool or a technique, putting it back, spinning it around. Then, in *Forty Flakes*, all the tentacles concentrated together. "*Forty Flakes* evolved according to the rhythm we had established with three earlier black and white prints, with Chris constantly adding and taking away figures," wrote Pamela Paulson, Brown's printer. *Seventy-Nine Men*, one of the black and white prints, is illustrated here. "Chris hesitated before using color, thinking we could only use one color per plate and that the entire separation would have to be planned in advance," Paulson continues. "When he discovered we could ink several colors per plate and change everything in each proof, he plunged forward. While discussing the project later, Chris told me the thing he liked most about Crown Point was being able to start without knowing what he was going to end up with. He said the etchings

evolved in the same way his paintings did."

In Brown's second project at Crown Point, in 1993, he continued to work with the plate surfaces, putting in figures, then scraping them out, adding spots of color here and there. This body of work is of shadowy figures standing on steps, and relates to the painting called *The Century Turning*. Brown's third Crown Point project, which we present here, has a relationship to the painting called *Tanager*, and is made up of four etchings of birds.

Whenever I walked into the studio during May, 1994, while Brown was working, I thought the octopus arms were all



Christopher Brown with printers Renée Bott and Daria Sywulak inking a plate for *The Farmer's Almanac*, San Francisco, 1994.

polishing, scraping and burnishing. All the prints are heavily worked, even *Divining Rod*, a hopeful and sun-filled image which is comparatively light with its pink background. In it, a robin sits against a red rectangle, and robin's-egg-blue eggs nestle about the long curl of a branch with new leaves.

Sweet Music shows soft feathers in an irregular line, perhaps the back of a woodpecker up close, with vignettes of two woodpeckers in front of it. *Sightings* holds many vignettes, sitting birds, a cardinal, blue jay and kingfisher among them, each framed as if held in memory separately. *The Farmer's Almanac*, the first of the series, set the approach for the whole group.

It is a combination of soft ground and aquatint, and most of the images on its seven plates were drawn and re-drawn many times. Each time Brown wanted to re-draw an image, he scraped the previous version out of the soft copper, then replaced it with a new version. The arduousness with which the plate has been worked gives a character to the print which is difficult to pinpoint, since Brown polishes so finely that his

(continued)

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New Releases



Drearing Road, 1994, spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with soap ground aquatint reversal, paper size: 35 x 34", image size: 25 x 25", edition 50.



The Farmer's Almanac, 1994, spit bite and soap ground aquatints with aquatint and soft ground; paper size: 35 x 34", image size: 25 x 25", edition 50.



Sightings, 1994, softground, soap ground and spit bite aquatints with aquatint and drypoint; paper size: 35 x 34"; image size: 25 x 25"; edition 50.



Sheer Music, 1994, aquatint, soap ground and spit bite aquatints with soft ground and drypoint; paper size: 35 x 34"; image size: 25 x 25"; edition 50.

(Christopher Brown continued)

effort becomes almost invisible. But the overall look is nevertheless distinctive.

In the print, ripe plums fall and birds wait alertly against an earthy background inset with bits of sky. The fruit is strongly present; I can almost smell its ripeness. The little birds at the lower right are just about to fly, but the woodpecker sits formally, looking like a woodpecker should look. It is as if a cloud has passed over, or we have just closed our eyes and then opened them. A moment, or an era, has passed.

"I keep re-doing images from my childhood," Brown mused. It was dinnertime and Brown had made what he thought might be the last adjustment to the print. As the printers began to ink the plates for what turned out to be the "o.k. to print", I went out for pizza. We ate sitting on the studio couch, looking happily at the just-completed print, and Brown told us about his childhood bird book. He had made it in a regular school period when he and another boy who could not sing did art instead of choir practice. "I saw what happened to the other boy, who wasn't wanted in the choir," Brown remembered, and I thought he was having more fun. So I sang loudly off-key, and it worked." He copied the birds out of a field guide, he said, pointing to the paint-encrusted one he had brought to the Crown Point studio. "And I wrote something about each bird," he added, "for instance, 'the female is very similar but much taller.'"

—Kathan Brown



Seventy-Nine Men, 1991, softground etching, paper size 42 x 41", image size: 50 x 30", edition 25.

CHRISTOPHER BROWN

Born 1951, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Lives in Berkeley, California.

Selected One-Person Exhibition

- 1977 Artists' Contemporary Gallery, Sacramento, California
1980 Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco ('83, '84, '87, '90)
1985 *Matrix*, University Art Museum, UC Berkeley
1986 *The Painted Room*, Madison Art Center, Wisconsin (traveled to Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, University Art Museum, Santa Barbara, Des Moines Art Center, Iowa, and University of California, Irvine)
Jan Turner Gallery, Los Angeles
Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, ('92)
1988 *The Water Paintings*, University of Texas, Arlington
1991 *Drawings and Prints*, Linda Farris Gallery, Seattle, Washington
1992 Edward Thorp Gallery, New York ('95)
1993 Yellowstone Art Center, Billings, Montana
1993 Campbell-Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco
1995 *Christopher Brown: Works on Paper*, Palo Alto Cultural Center
1995-1996 *History and Memory: Paintings by Christopher Brown*, an exhibition organized by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (traveling to the San Jose Museum of Art, The Contemporary Museum in Honolulu, the Palm Springs Desert Museum, California, and the Norton Gallery, West Palm Beach, Florida)

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1977 *Introductions*, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco
1979 *New Images-Bay Area*, The Oakland Museum, California
1982 *Fresh Paint*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
1984 *San Francisco Bay Area Painting*, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska
Bathers, Coe Kerr Gallery, New York
New Work: Paintings 1984, Asher Faure Gallery, Los Angeles 1986
The Second Newport Biennial, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California
1987 *Under Currents*, Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Oregon
1988 *Paintings and Sculpture by Recipients of Art Awards*, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York
Experimental Workshop: Prints, van Straaten Gallery, Chicago
1989 *10 + 10: Contemporary Soviet and American Painters*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, and the Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin)
1992 *The Figure: Two Bay Area Artists*, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas