Crown Point Press
Newsletter
April 1995

Overview

China Connection

The woodblock printing company, Rong Bao Zhai, is four hundred years old, and for the past hundred years it has been located on Liulichan, a narrow shopping street in the center of Beijing. Until the People's Republic of China began in 1949, Rong Bao Zhai's customers were aristocrats who bought works of art and art supplies for painting and writing, which occupied a good deal of their time. Now the shoppers are mostly from Taiwan or Japan. On my first visit to China in 1987, Tom Marioni and I followed Sören Edgren, an American expert in Chinese books and printed art, into a hallway at the side of the art supply store and up a dark flight of stairs. A door at the top was flung open. I blinked my eyes and was transported to another age.

We faced a long room with a wall of narrow windows from which light streamed in palpable rays. Silhouetted against the windows were about a dozen people at tables piled with small irregular pieces of wood and rectangular stacks of paper. The people sat still, only their arms moving, lifting sheets of paper sideways, making fluttering motions. As my eyes adjusted after being in the dark corridor, I saw potted plants, thermos pitchers, and little ceramic dishes, some full of colors. Almost everyone was wearing blue clothes. I realized that the rays of light were visible because the whole room was filled with mist coming from a pipe running along the ceiling.

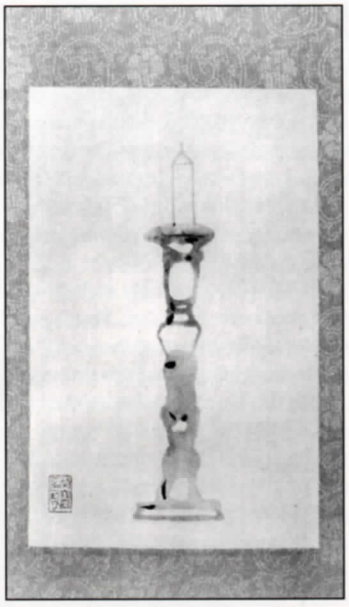
The water mist, which is released periodically into the room, keeps the humidity level constant. Because the ink is water-based and is absorbed into the paper, it won't look the same from one printing session to the next unless the paper is reliably the same dampness. And since paper expands and contracts as it becomes damper or drier, controlling the moisture in the room makes accurate registration possible.

The blocks are flat little hunks of pear wood, and each holds part of an image. The short Chinese name for block printing, *dou ban*, means "many blocks" or "assembled blocks," and this is appropriate since a single image is assembled from many blocks. The other name is *mu ban shui yin*, "wood block water print." Printing is done without a press, quickly and gracefully, with the printer's eye on the developing whole. If the print doesn't seem right, at any point a printer may make a correction by brushing ink directly on the paper. Printers are constantly making judgments about how much ink to apply to the blocks, the degree of wetness, and whether to add more ink after printing.

The paper is very thin but strong. Prints are often traditionally printed on silk rather than paper, and in that case the fabric is mounted to a sheet of thin paper before printing. Otherwise there would be so much stretch that registration would be impossible. The printed paper or silk-paper sandwich is mounted later on heavier paper or a scroll.

After we had toured the printing shop at Rong Bao Zhai, we had a long meeting with several managers in a beautiful reception room hung with scrolls. Rong Bao Zhai had already produced tests for us, but not in the way I wanted. Sören Edgren had taken two small ink drawings by Francesco Clemente to them, and I expected to see proofs that I could show Clemente. Instead, the entire editions were finished. Clemente loved one of the prints, an image of a candle he called *The Two Flames*, but he felt the second image wasn't exactly right and we threw away all the prints.

I had gone to China to figure out a way



Francesco Clemente, *The Two Flames*, 1987.
Color woodcut bordered by silk brocade.
Paper size: 10⅜ x 6⅛";
image size: 7¾ x 3½". Edition 100.

our artists could work with the craftsmen there. I thought my first trip would be exploratory and I hadn't brought any art with me. But as our meeting went on, I began to think that the managers at Rong Bao Zhai were willing to accept another drawing and to entertain the idea of working directly with an artist. Their primary motivation was curiosity about us, as our payment would go to the government and their subsidies wouldn't change. I thought we should move ahead while they were interested, and I asked Tom Marioni, who had accompanied me as my husband rather than as an artist expecting to work, if he could make a drawing right there. He said he would try.

The next morning we unrolled the drawing for the print that became *Peking*, and laid it out on the elegant lacquer table in the reception room at Rong Bao Zhai. The edition of *Peking* was finished in 1989, two years after our trip.

After I got back from China in 1987, I began studying Chinese, and the next year, impatient with Rong Bao Zhai's slowness, I decided to make a trip with my Chinese teacher, Jean Du, to search for another woodblock printing shop. Du's home, before she came to the United States, had been in Hangzhou, about a three-hour train ride from Shanghai. There I met, for the first time, Professor Yang Yong Hua, who later acted as our coordinator and translator. Because I was enchanted by the city of Hangzhou, Du and I searched for a printer there, and through Du's relatives we found someone who said he was skilled and would take on the work. I gave him a small drawing of Pat Steir's and one of Tom Marioni's. Six months later, when I arrived with both artists, the printer showed us what we thought was a proof of Steir's image. It looked lovely. But when we asked to see the blocks, there was only one, and most of the "proof" was really a painting. There was no way it could have been editioned.

Marioni's drawing was a calligraphic rendering of the mathematical figure *Pi*. *Pi* symbolizes the imperfect, Marioni says, because it is an infinite irregular progression. As time went on, I began to think it symbolized our China program as well. *Pi* never repeats itself and is not logical. The printer said he would bring the proof of *Pi* the next day and, after our discovery of his subterfuge on the Steir print, we thought he wouldn't show up. He didn't, but his wife did. She told us she had done the printing, which seemed to be quite good. After she realized Marioni liked the

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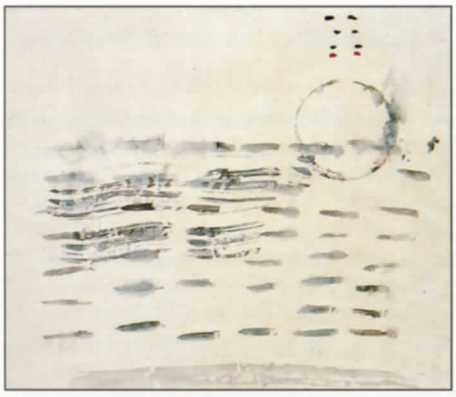

Pat Steir, *Seascape*, 1989. Woodcut with hand painting printed on silk mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 27 x 27½"; image size: 13 x 15¾". Edition 65.

(China Connection continued)

proof, with great relief she took a package out of her handbag which contained the entire finished edition. The prints looked fine, but all were on transparent silk, unmounted, without a paper backing. When we asked about mounting, she said it was impossible. We paid the bill and rolled up the rectangles of cloth, hoping we could figure out some way to mount them when we got home. It was not an easy job, since there was no mucilage sizing in the ink or on the silk. The color bled and ran when we moistened the print prior to mounting. We wasted a lot of the prints trying to figure out how to mount them, but eventually Crown Point master printer Brian Shure did it.

I had left a second drawing of Steir's at Shanghai's famous woodblock printing shop, Duo Yun Xuan, equal in reputation to Beijing's Rong Bao Zhai, where we had already worked. When we arrived at Duo Yun Xuan, Steir and I were pleased to discover the printer who had worked on her project was a woman, Hu Qin Yun, or Master Hu, as we call her, respectfully. Hu later was selected by the workers at Duo Yun Xuan to come to San Francisco to give a demonstration at the opening of our building in 1990, and after that she continued a connection with us. Her printing is the most subtle and beautiful we encountered anywhere in China.

Steir had made the drawing for *Seascape*, shown here, on a scrap of silk, and when we looked at the proof it was on a much larger piece. We thought it was wonderful, and Steir had only a minor change to suggest. Master Hu made another proof right then, and Steir signed it o.k. to print. At that time, we didn't talk about the margins. The edition arrived in San Francisco, as promised, six months later, and I was surprised to find a brush stroke cut off at the bottom. The incomplete stroke made it seem that there was too much blank space at the top. I was dismayed until I got out the drawing and discovered that Steir had drawn the stroke partly off the page. The craftsmen had reconstructed the stroke so it had appeared whole in the proof, then cut it off again in the edition to match the drawing. I couldn't blame them, but I still thought the print didn't look right, and I suggested further trimming at the top to Steir. Instead she added a few more marks by hand on each print. It was an inspired idea. Those little marks seem to enliven and focus the delicate image.

I asked Robert Bechtle to do our second project at Rong Bao Zhai in Beijing, though it seemed a little perverse to send a picture of cars on a San Francisco street to be printed there. Bechtle is an old friend, however, and I knew I could count on him for diplomacy and resilience. Also, I suppose I had some idea of testing the workshop's skills. Certainly Mr. Sun, the manager at Rong Bao Zhai, saw it that way, and he took up the challenge.

Bechtle had made two drawings, and Mr. Sun chose one of them, which became the print *Potrero Houses—Pennsylvania Avenue*, called the First Car by the printers. The other later became the Second Car, *Albany Monte Carlo*, shown here. On my first trip, Sun had told me it would be best if our artists worked with Chinese materials, so I had bought some Chinese watercolor paint, silk, and brushes, and had given them to Bechtle to see what he could do with them. He stretched the silk like watercolor paper and taped the edges to keep it flat, then painted meticulously on it. He gave up trying to use the Chinese brushes, but did stick to the paints I had given him. The colors were muted, but Bechtle found them acceptable, since his colors normally aren't bright.

When Bechtle and I got to Beijing to see the proof, we were amazed. The craftsmen at Rong Bao Zhai had carved forty-two blocks, which were piled up on the printer's table when we walked into the shop. We handled the blocks as if they were toys, finding a bit of a tree here, a car taillight there. We couldn't keep our eyes off the proof, it was so lively. The printers and carvers stood waiting. There was nothing to do but extend our congratulations. "I really couldn't think of anything that could make it better," Bechtle remembers.

China, itself, was for Bechtle a remarkable experience. "I found the whole thing rather emotional," he told me later. "There was such a powerful sense of place, and the character of the people was so strongly present. I still think about the scenery, but what sticks with me even more is the feeling of the cities, the bicycles, the crowds, the way people looked at us—the juxtaposition of the culture being old and grounded and at the same time eager to catch up with the world. In the past I never thought I was very interested in Asian art, but now I search it out. The physical appearance of the country really inhabits the art."

When we received the edition prints of *Potrero Houses—Pennsylvania Avenue*, the printing was consistently good. But in the mounting, lots of brush hairs and bits of dirt and straw had been caught between the print and the heavier sheet on which it was mounted. The dirt showed clearly through the silk. When we complained about this to Mr. Sun at Rong Bao Zhai, he was surprised at our concern. "No one sees that," he said. His tone implied a simple statement of fact, not an excuse, and I realized that in China, people have learned not to see what they consider unimportant. We ended up throwing away the worst of the flawed prints, settling for a smaller edition than we had wanted (and paid for). I decided, in the future, we should do the mounting ourselves. Mr. Sun agreed that his mounters would train one of our printers to do that, and Brian Shure went there to learn.

The next step, I thought, was to proceed with the second drawing Bechtle had done, but when I broached this idea at Rong Bao Zhai, the price was double that of the First Car. I sent the second drawing to Duo Yun Xuan in Shanghai and was quoted a price exactly the same as what Rong Bao Zhai was asking. "They sent someone to Beijing to look at the First Car," Professor Yang explained. The price was close to what we would have paid in Japan after the value of the yen

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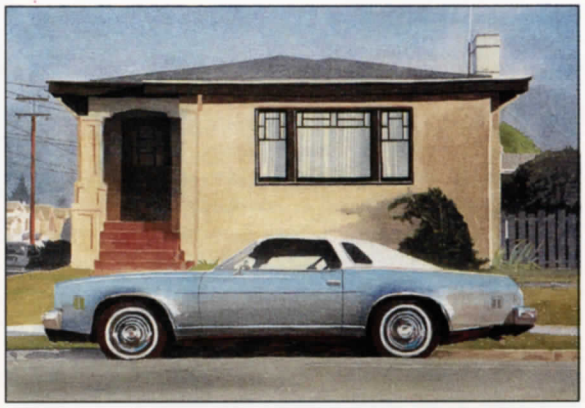


Robert Bechtle, *Albany Monte Carlo*, 1990. Color woodcut printed on silk mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 26 x 25¾"; image size: 10 x 14⅝". Edition 50.

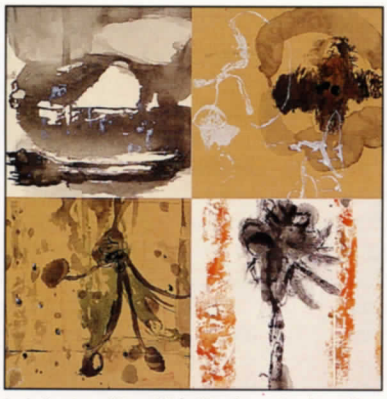
Janis Provisor

New Releases

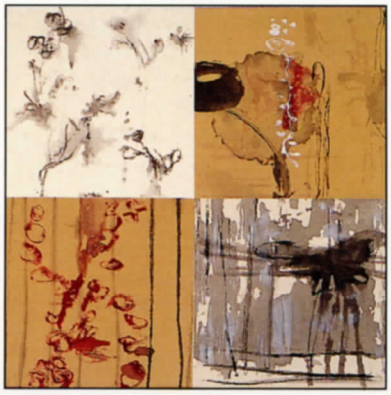
Janis Provisor was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1946. She studied at the San Francisco Art Institute, and in 1981 moved to New York and began showing at the Holly Solomon Gallery. She was making textured paintings in which she built up the canvas with modeling paste, then painted over it. "I began to feel I was no longer painting, no longer discovering," she says. Trying to find a way out of the predicament, she spent a lot of time in museums. There, she says, she "discovered seventeenth century Chinese artists who dealt with the ground and space in such a remarkably modern way, a way that made sense in my work. For me it was like opening up a box; it was a window that I was able to slide through. I began a love affair with Chinese painting." Provisor's new woodcuts reflect a sensitivity to their water-based medium and a whimsical equilibrium that has something to do with China. *Zitan* and *Jumu* are two Chinese names for wood.

Provisor's paintings are in the collections of the Fort Wayne Museum, Indiana; the Albright Knox Art Museum, Buffalo, New York; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, and the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. She has received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Ford Foundation grant. In 1992 her work was included in the purchase exhibition of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her most recent one-person exhibitions in the United States were at Barbara Toll Fine Art in New York in 1992 and at the Dorothy Goldeen Gallery in Los Angeles in 1993.

Janis Provisor, *China Mainland*, 1994. Woodcut printed on xuan zhi paper mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 20¾ x 35"; image size: 12¾ x 27⅛". Edition 50.



Janis Provisor, *Zitan*, 1994. Woodcut printed on silk mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 20½ x 20½"; image size: 12½ x 12½". Edition 50.



Janis Provisor, *Jumu*, 1994. Woodcut printed on silk mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 20½ x 20½"; image size: 12½ x 12½". Edition 50.

Brad Davis

New Releases

Brad Davis was born in 1942 in Duluth, Minnesota and after graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1967 moved to New York because, as he says, he "wanted to be part of the art world." He began doing graduate work at Hunter College and took a course in Chinese painting. It "hit a spiritual note," he remembers. In the 1980s he was one of the artists who painted in the manner called Pattern and Decoration, and to him Chinese painting seemed related. He was particularly intrigued by what he describes as "the breezy, light-hearted, imaginative painting" on Chinese porcelain vases. He wanted to develop a code of brush strokes as Chinese painters had, but to do it in a way that suited his Western background. In his print, *Night Reflections-Ching Ming*, festival lights are reflected in the West Lake at night, and in *Transformation* the landscape assumes a dragon form.

Davis's paintings are in museum collections in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and the Denver Art Museum also own his work. In Europe his work is in the collections of the Birmingham Art Gallery, Birmingham, England; the Groninger Museum, the Netherlands; the Neue Galerie/Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen, Germany; and the Saarland Museum, Saarbracken, Germany. He is represented by the Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.

Brad Davis, *Night Reflections-Ching Ming*, 1994. Woodcut printed on xuan zhi paper mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 35⅜ x 26¾"; image size: 26⅜ x 17¾". Edition 50.

Brad Davis, *Transformation*, 1994. Woodcut printed on silk mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 37⅜ x 26¾"; image size: 28⅜ x 17¾". Edition 25.

(China Connection continued)

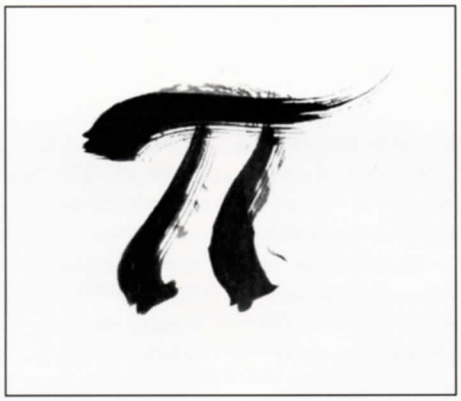
had escalated to the point we could no longer work there. When I blurted out to the manager at Duo Yun Xuan that his prices were the same as Japan's, he replied, "Our work is better than Japanese work." The situation started to look hopeless. I reasoned that since the Chinese woodcut shops had never worked for anyone but the Chinese government, they had no way to calculate prices and simply tried to guess what we would pay. The problem was that if the guess turned out to be wrong, they had to stick to it in order not to lose face with each other. Later, I thought the high prices might have been set because neither workshop wanted to do that particular print.

We call Yang Yong Hua Professor Yang (or sometimes, simply, the Professor), following the Chinese custom of prefacing with titles the names of people especially worthy of respect. He is a retired professor of English, our friend, translator, and stabilizer of our China program. To try to break the impasse caused by the price of printing Bechtle's Second Car, Professor Yang set out to find still another printing shop. He discovered that there are only four studios in China printing woodblocks, including Rong Bao Zhai and Duo Yun Xuan. The other two print mostly New Year's and Spring Festival pictures, and the Professor was afraid they wouldn't be up to doing Bechtle's print.

"Some failures have taught me that Crown Point's woodblock prints can only be done by well trained and experienced masters," he wrote. "The process looks simple, but every move of the hand at work contains artistic feeling and delicate skill. I realized that for the China program of Crown Point Press, the two leading studios, Rong Bao Zhai and Duo Yun Xuan, are the best choices."

Nevertheless, Bechtle's Second Car, *Albany Monte Carlo*, ended up in the town of Suzhou, near Hangzhou, at Tao Hua Wu, one of the shops that specializes in Spring Festival prints. Before we gave Tao Hua Wu the drawing of the car, the workshop at Suzhou had produced prints by Robert Kushner and Janis Provisor, and both artists were pleased with the work. I realized that if I wanted to use the drawing Bechtle had done, Tao Hua Wu was the only possibility. The manager was eager for the job, and we gave it to him. When the proof arrived in the mail, we thought it was quite beautiful. Although not as crisp as *Potrero Houses*, it had what Bechtle called "a nice overall character." He approved it, asking only that the printer try to get rid of what seemed like flat tires on the car.

When the edition arrived, the tires looked fine, but the prints were completely different from the proof. The color was much brighter and not in balance. A garish purple shadow under the car was particularly frightening. We were horrified and telephoned the Professor at once. He called us back the next day and explained that Gu Zhi Jun, the printer who had done the proof, had quit, and another printer had done the edition. The manager had told Professor Yang he thought the edition was improved, since the new printer had achieved brighter colors, which are difficult. He added that the proof was rather dull.



Tom Marioni, *Pi*, 1988. Woodcut printed in red on silk mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 22½ x 23¼"; image size: 12¾ x 19⅝". Edition 30.

Eventually, someone at Tao Hua Wu was able to reprint the edition to more or less match the first proof, and Bechtle and Brian Shure touched up the prints with watercolor in San Francisco. Meanwhile, Bechtle had made a third drawing, and Shure took it to Duo Yun Xuan in Shanghai when he went to China at the end of 1989. I had hoped a new drawing might give the managers at Duo Yun Xuan a chance to rethink their price. But this time, they simply refused the work, saying they were too busy.

The Professor had to explain the situation to me. "In China, the studios usually duplicate paintings of Chinese deceased artists," he wrote. "If any defect is made, the deceased artists will not say no. On the jobs for Crown Point Press, the heads of the studios have to use their top transformers, carvers, and printers. Each must work very carefully. Otherwise there will be defects and the prints will be destroyed." That was why, the Professor said, the studios would work with us only if they were paid a great deal of money. And there was another problem. "When the printers make prints based on Chinese paintings the whole process is completed in a continuous period of time," the Professor explained. "This is not the case with work from Crown Point Press because the artist must approve a proof. Owing to these differences, neither of the heads of the two studios is willing to undertake jobs from Crown Point Press."

After the managers at Duo Yun Xuan in Shanghai had refused Bechtle's Second Car, however, the workshop produced a very successful print for us, Janis Provisor's *Long Fall*, printed by Master Hu. Provisor and her husband, artist Brad Davis, and I made the trip to China in May 1989. Provisor won the hearts of all the workers at Duo Yun Xuan the moment she walked into their formal reception room where they had assembled to meet us. "Qi Bai Shi," she said with delight, pointing to a hanging scroll and naming the early twentieth century artist who had painted it.

Provisor worked in three situations, the shops in Suzhou and Shanghai and with an independent printer in Hangzhou. In Hangzhou on a sparkling day during that May visit, Provisor and I were sitting in a boat on the West Lake, and Provisor said, pointing dreamily at the shore, "I think I'll come back here and rent one of those buildings for a studio for a year or two." Given the beauty of Hangzhou at that moment, it didn't seem such an astonishing idea as it turned out to be. Hangzhou is the city Marco Polo wrote about in the thirteenth century, calling it "the best that is in the world." He described pleasure boats like ours from which a visitor could "take in the whole prospect in its full beauty and grandeur, with its numberless palaces, temples and gardens, full of lofty trees, and hills sloping to the shore." There are now only a few temples, and the palaces are gone. But the lofty trees and the hills rising closely around the lake remain. I told Provisor if she got a building for a studio in Hangzhou, I'd share it with her and we'd start a Crown Point woodcut studio there. Five years later, Provisor and her husband, Brad Davis, made the move.

In 1993, the year before Provisor and Davis went back to China, the Chinese government instigated the "To Get Rich is Glorious" campaign and almost everyone, overnight, became an entrepreneur. Professor Yang formed a trading company with a group of retired professors, and filled his apartment with shoes and soft drinks and other items from Hong Kong to sell on the local market. Provisor and Davis, having spent more than four years in New York after returning from our trip, accepted teaching jobs in Hong Kong. After four months there, they planned six months in Hangzhou and arrived there with their six year old son in February 1994.

(continued on page 6)

Calendar of Events and Exhibitions

May 4 - June 17, 1995

China Connection - Bechtle, Clemente, Davis, Kushner, Lee, Marioni, Provisor, Steir, and **Tuttle**.

May 11 - 16, 1995

Karen McCready, Crown Point Press East Coast Representative, will be exhibiting at *Prints at the Drake Hotel* in Chicago during **ART 1995 Chicago**.

June 22 - September 2, 1995

Changing Group Exhibition.

Notes

Janis Provisor, Brad Davis and Tom Marioni will discuss their experiences in China at 7p.m. on June 15 in Crown Point Press's San Francisco gallery.

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, 1995.

(China Connection continued)

Yang, Provisor, and Davis together organized a woodcut studio for Crown Point and rented a place for it near Professor Yang's apartment. The business technically was owned by the trading company of the retired professors.

After Master Hu visited us in San Francisco, she retired from Duo Yun Xuan, because mandatory retirement age in China is fifty-five years old. She was the shop's most skilled printer, and it later wanted her back, but the break left her free and she accepted Professor Yang's offer of a job in our woodcut studio in Hangzhou. Gu Zhi Jun, the studio's transformer, block carver and second printer, had carved the blocks and printed the first proofs of Bechtle's Second Car in Suzhou. He had left Tao Hua Wu to be part of an artists' cooperative woodcut studio, where his wife also prints. When Professor Yang approached him about working in Hangzhou he accepted.

Robert Kushner, *White Anemone, State 2*, 1989. Color woodcut printed on silk mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 20½ x 23"; image size: 11 x 15". Edition 21.

Provisor and Davis stayed in Hangzhou five months, and Master Hu and Xiao Gu (called "Little Gu," because he was less experienced than she was), started prints for both of them. We set up a budget and the printers planned to complete eight prints in the first year. I was looking forward to making a trip with a new artist, but when Provisor and Davis left Hangzhou, none of the prints started for them had been finished.

In the centerfold of this newsletter you can see the five prints produced in a year's operation of our Crown Point workshop in China. We closed the workshop when the lease on the building was up in May 1995. The Professor had left in December for the United States to be with his daughter, who lives here with her husband and the Professor's grandchild. Master Hu went back to spend her retirement in Shanghai, and Xiao Gu returned to the woodcut cooperative studio in Suzhou. We may be able to do some future work on Crown Point projects with him there.

Unlike our project in Japan, where we worked with a single printer in a single town, our Chinese woodcut experience was kaleidoscopic. I simply followed where it led. We produced thirty-three prints by nine artists, seven of whom travelled to China. Whenever I became bewildered I reminded myself that we were working in the country that invented printing and continued to use the first form of printing almost exactly the same way for more a thousand years. We were allowed to use that form just at the moment it is about to disappear.

—Kathan Brown

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