

Overview

Gravure Group

This is a first for Crown Point Press—a portfolio with several artists' work in it. We haven't published groups of artists together in the past because my mind-set is the sort that focuses on one thing at a time, despite knowing that in the real world things overlap. Now, I'm studying the idea that sometimes a refractive focus beats a spotlight. I asked four artists each to make one or two photogravure prints because I wanted to find out what they, individually, would do with the process, and also because I had a feeling there are connections among them. I was curious how each person's work would relate to that of the others.

I will discuss those questions here, and at the same time think about a couple of points raised by art critic Dave Hickey in a book I recently read, *The Invisible Dragon*, published by Art Issues Press in Los Angeles in 1993, and in a 1995 essay for an exhibition at the Paule Anglim Gallery in San Francisco. Hickey's thesis—or at least a part of it, as I understand it—is that images gain authority by their beauty, and power by their ability to “re-construct the beholder's view of things.” Visual pleasure is achieved through a combination of the familiar and the exotic, Hickey believes, and with visual pleasure, images can penetrate people's consciousness and change their views of the world. Consequently, the world, itself, actually changes. In general, I like this thesis. And I can at least partly go along with Hickey's distrust of the “dragon”: the museum, university, or other “therapeutic institution” that gives us what its “art professionals” think is good for us and explains it to death. What I don't like about Hickey's thinking is a careless and confused use of some of the defining terms for conceptual art. But more about that later.

You might not immediately suspect connections among the four artists in Crown Point's Gravure Group, the main subject of this essay. Ed Ruscha, Christopher Brown, Tom Marioni, and Gay

Outlaw are different ages and different in their approaches to art. One thread that holds them together is that they all like a fine finish in their work, which gives it a

Ed Ruscha was a young artist, only twenty-five, in 1962 when he was included in an exhibition called *New Painting of Common Objects* at the Pasadena Art



Ed Ruscha, *Section 22*, 1995. Photogravure. Paper size: 16 x 20"; image size: 10 3/4 x 13 1/2". Edition 45.

gem-like quality and offers each of them at least a toehold in the labyrinth of beauty. None of these artists is a photographer, though all of them from time to time use photography. Ruscha and Brown are painters; Marioni and Outlaw are sculptors who could also be called conceptual artists. The painters are not conceptual artists, but conceptual art has set into art's general framework the notion that artists can comfortably slip from one medium to another, using anything they can think of to realize work. All four treat photography as a tool. Ruscha has been showing since the early-1960s, Marioni since the late-1960s, and Brown since the mid-1970s. Outlaw's first one-person exhibition was in 1990.

Museum. It included Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and a few other artists, mostly older than Ruscha and mostly from New York, who were soon to be regularly exhibited together and called pop artists. Ruscha's painting, *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*, done in 1962 of the studio logo for 20th Century Fox, is considered a classic of pop art, as is his painting of a Standard gas station done a year later. As it turned out, however, what Ruscha wanted to do wasn't necessarily to paint common objects; it was to get away from “the hot brush.”

“Some painters just love paint,” he said. “They get up in the morning and grab a brush, not knowing what they are

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going to do, but they just have to have that hot brush moving those colors. ...I began to see that the only thing to do would be a preconceived image. It was an enormous freedom to be premeditated about my art. I wanted to make pictures, but I didn't want to paint."

One way to make pictures without painting is to use photography, and Ruscha did this by making simple, inexpensive books, which have influenced many books and photographs by others who were yet to come when his *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* appeared in 1963. The gasoline stations, all found on the route Ruscha frequently drove between his home in Los Angeles and Oklahoma City where his parents lived, are shown frontally in photographs that are clearly snapshots. "I had this idea for a book title—*Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*," he says, "And it became like a fantasy rule in my mind that I knew I had to follow. Then it was just a matter of being a good little art soldier and going out and finishing it. It was a straightforward case of getting factual information and bringing it back."

Getting factual information and bringing it back are what realism in art is all about. Abstract expressionist artists, who dominated contemporary art in the 1950s, emphasized personal expression and scorned realism. When Ruscha and other painters came along with an inclination to explore reality straightforwardly, as opposed to expressively, and a disinclination to pile up detail, their art turned out to be emblematic.

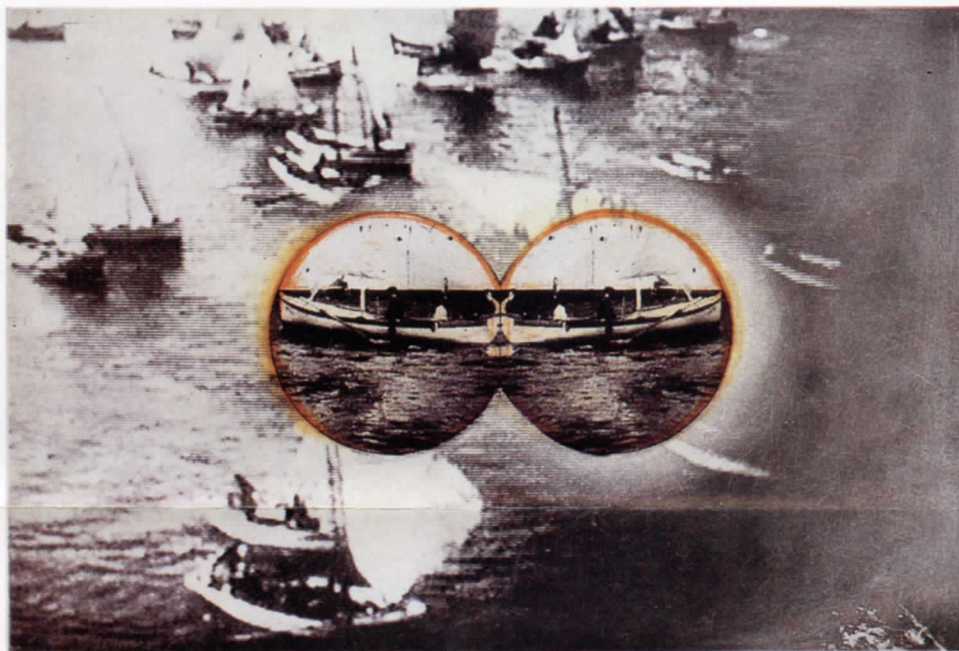
In the 1970s, Ruscha painted many pictures of words and groups of words, the way someone else, he said, might paint "flowers in a vase." One of the groups of words was "Scratches on the Film," a phrase that now, he told me, has come back to haunt him. *Section 22*, his contribution to the *Gravure Group* portfolio, is a photograph of a hill in Geological Survey Section 22, an area near his home in Southern California. There are, literally, scratches on the film, deliberate scratches that make the haunting words into figures. Standing up next to them, inexplicably, is a little spiky plant, right on the picture plane with the

scratches, while the landscape recedes into space. "I'm always grappling with the picture-plane, like everybody else," Ruscha said when I asked him if that was an issue.

I think the emphasis on a flat picture-plane that dominated painting in the 1960s and 1970s came, like emblematic painting, from an inclination away from self-expression towards the real world. Painters focused their attention on the reality of the flat object that is the painting itself. Critic Hickey says painters today are "trapped like cocker spaniels in the eternal, positive presentness of a



Christopher Brown studying his proofs for *Between The Eyes*, San Francisco, 1995.



Christopher Brown, *Between the Eyes*, 1995. Photogravure with soft ground etching and aquatint. Paper size: 16 x 20"; image size: 9 1/4 x 13 1/2". Edition 45.

terrain so visually impoverished that we cannot even lie to any effect in its language of images—nor imagine with any authority—nor even remember." His complaint identifies discontent that underlies a sea change in art. It began some time ago: the artists in my *Gravure Group* are not alone in lying, imagining, and remembering at the expense of flatness (even Jasper Johns has done it).

Christopher Brown, beginning his career as a painter about a decade after

Ruscha, has enlisted the picture plane to aid him in his project of remembering. "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," he says. A painting has the ability to combine memories with immediate perceptions because we see it as a window. Brown disturbs our expectations of space in the window, showing a



Tom Marioni, *The Hand of the Artist*, 1995. Photogravure printed in ochre with color aquatint and fingerprints applied by the artist. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 10½ x 6¾". Edition 45.

scene from above, or very close-up, with perhaps another view from very far away. Often he places repeated objects on the picture plane—snowflakes, for example, in an etching called *Forty Flakes*—and then sets a scene behind them. This provides, as he says, "a film between you and the image so that you cannot get into the picture in a conventional way."

Brown, like the other members of this Gravure Group, looks for subject matter in the real world, present and past, rather than searching his own emotions and reactions. To get into the territory of memory he uses photographs, though not very precisely. He looks at them, then draws some of their images into his paintings, drawings, and prints with many hand-eye modifications. In making *Between the Eyes*, his gravure print in this portfolio, he transferred to copper plates two photographs taken from his television set. One is a harbor scene; the other—which he used twice—comes from Sergey Eisenstein's famous 1925 film, *Potemkin*. Brown worked the plates by hand, burnishing part of the harbor

scene to suspend it like a curtain at the picture plane. The distance in it confuses us, since the image from the film sits even farther away, outlined with a binocular shape and a glowing yellow edge. Brown worked with the gravure plates exactly as he works on his other etchings, proofing many color choices, scraping, burnishing, making changes till he obtained an image with the beauty and meaning he desired.

Now, I'd like to return to Dave Hickey's ideas and also to go back in time to the early 1970s when Tom Marioni was concentrating mainly on performance and installation works. Hickey expands his lament about the tyranny of flatness by saying that because of it "contemporary artists have been, in effect, forced to divert their endeavors into realms of speech, dance, text, photography, and installation design." I

know a good many artists who have worked in the listed mediums, and it is not my impression that sneaking away from the flatness issue was a primary concern.

Just as Ruscha, a painter, wanted to make pictures without painting, Marioni, a sculptor, wanted to shape material without carving or welding. Both were going for realism without emphasizing self-expression. Just as Ruscha's painting—and that of other early pop artists—became emblematic, Marioni's sculpture—and that of other early conceptual artists—had an unvarnished clarity. (Minimal Art fits in here too, but it is beyond the scope of this discussion.) The de-emphasis of self-expression also led artists, including the two in our group, to desire works not so grand and manipulative of viewers' emotions as abstract expressionist art which, by the 1960s, was dominating magazine and museum attention—not just the original abstract expressionists, but, by this time, third or fourth generations of artists without much comprehension of the culture that spawned the originals.

"Something I learned from Miles Davis," Marioni wrote in 1979, "was that by turning his back on the audience when he played, he was an artist working. He said once that he was a musician, not a performer. I have held onto my notion of the sculpture action where the action is directed at the material I'm manipulating instead of at the audience, like in theater." Hickey has written that conceptual art



Tom Marioni, *3rd Street*, 1995. Photogravure with color aquatint. Paper size: 16 x 20; image size: 5½ x 8¾". Edition 45.



Gay Outlaw, *Tailing*, 1995. Photogravure. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 13¾ x 9½". Edition 45.

was not, as is often supposed, a reaction to commercialization of the art object, but instead was a reaction to commercialization of everything else—commercial art manipulates viewers in order to sell them products—and he goes on to make the point that commercial, religious, and political art are basically theater. Marioni's 1979 statement from which I quoted above ended with this thought: "The 70s is and the 80s probably will be a cosmetic age of decoration and theatrical-



Gay Outlaw signing prints in the Crown Point studio, San Francisco, 1995.

ity." Hickey praises art that he believes "embodies" cultural values that have been "distorted and submerged in the advocacy of commerce", and himself recommends that artists use the theatrical devices of commercial art for their own ends. At this point, a carelessness with terms comes in: Hickey steps onto quicksand, I think, when he continues his argument by suggesting that art *objects* are needed to embody the values of a culture, and by speaking of the dangers of "abandoning art for concept." Art and concept are inseparable. Artists are no longer artists if they abandon art, and they are not visual artists if they do not consider what their work looks like.

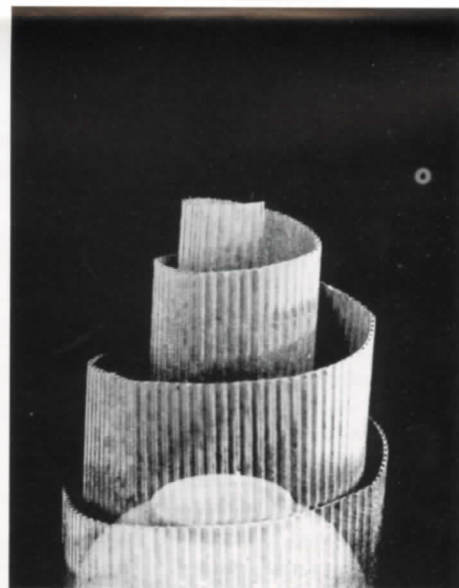
To the sculptor's traditional concerns with space, Marioni, along with other artists of his generation, added time. In time and space, early conceptual artists worked with unusual materials. Marioni used beer, for example, drinking it with friends and putting the bottles up in a museum as a record of a "social work of art." He used sound, drumming on paper fitted with a microphone, creating—at the same time—a drawing. He continues to do drawings that result from repeated movements measuring the reach of arm, hand, or finger. These are beautiful drawings—he, like all good artists, has thrown out the ones that were not. The beer bottles on the wall were beautiful, too—care was taken in selecting the brand and in designing the racks. Hickey speaks often about beauty, that stubborn, strange beauty that infiltrates our consciousness and carries meaning, and I agree that this is a component of all art that lasts. Art lasts, of course, not only physically. Art with the best chance to survive by changing things for individuals and eventually for the world is both beautiful and inventive.

Marioni is interested in photography for its ability to record, and each of his two contributions to our *Gravure Group* portfolio focuses in a different way on this function. Though he has used video off and on for about twenty-five years, he has never exploited its capacity for special effects. To him it is a poetic way of record-keeping, and he has videotaped and photographed his studio, his shows

and some aspects of his neighborhood. His documentary approach to video and photography, I think, confirms his bias toward realism. The photogravure print *3rd Street* began with Marioni's having a black and white negative made from a slide he shot in 1973 of the street outside his studio. We transferred that image to a copper plate, and he drew other plates by hand to lay in the color. Third Street in San Francisco (now home to the new San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) was at the turn of the century a classy address, and Breens, with bare-breasted caryatids holding up an enormous carved-wood back-bar, was a late-night favorite for parties after the opera. It became a newspaper reporters' hangout, stayed open during prohibition, declined with its neighborhood after that, and closed in 1979. Marioni's print, on close examination, transports us to another time.

The Hand of the Artist, Marioni's second gravure print, demonstrates a different kind of realism, the kind that led sculptors to present materials for their symbolic meanings. The image came from a photogram, in which an object is recorded actual size, without an intermediate negative. Many of Marioni's drawings are records of his reach, and this is a record of his hand, slightly cupped in a

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Gay Outlaw, *Tatlin*, 1995. Photogravure. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 13¾ x 9½". Edition 45.

(*Gravure Group continued*)

gesture of touching something. Marioni added his fingerprints individually to each print.

Only the older artists in our group, Ruscha and Marioni, make strict reference to what is actual. Gay Outlaw, like Christopher Brown, adds distance easily. She is a sculptor who uses photography, she says, "to study form, to develop a vocabulary of form." For her two photogravure prints she constructed small objects of cardboard and tinfoil, then photographed them with Polaroid negative film. The negatives were used for making the photogravure plates, just one for each image. Outlaw has studied photography and taken a class in gravure. She worked closely with printer Daria Sywulak to make prints of exquisite precision.

Tailing is a glistening spiral, resembling the scrap of metal, or tailing, released as a larger piece of metal is machined. The form rises from the bottom of the page with what seems to me a joyful volition. *Tatlin* is corrugated cardboard wound around an upturned kitchen bowl, standing in with grace and solidity for a monument built of iron and glass by Vladimir Tatlin, the father of Russian constructivism, in 1920.

Outlaw, in 1995 at the threshold of her career, works from a standpoint different from that of the other artists in our group. She has every material in the

world available to her, and her choices are a matter of utility, not principle. The first sculpture I saw of hers was a large (knee-height), beautifully-made wedge of cake in a corner of a gallery. For the moment, much of her sculpture is made of pastry, and—aware of what has gone on in recent art—she does not see this as something that would shock anyone.

"Pastry is quite a challenge to handle," she says, "And because I was trained as a pastry chef I know something about how to use it." She has recently completed a public sculpture project commissioned to stay for eighteen months in San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens. Inside a three-foot-high, 30-foot-long serpentine-shaped "tin" with one transparent end are neatly packed bricks of fruitcake which she baked herself. When I asked her why she baked it herself, she answered that she needed control over the ingredients and the size of the bricks if it were to age properly. She hopes, after the fruitcake's allotted time as sculpture, some of it, at least, will be eaten, and she consulted a food scientist in designing an environment that would allow a good chance of that. "But," she adds, "Remember that a lot of fruitcake is never eaten. It is mostly a symbolic food."

Outlaw's fruitcake sculpture is not an art object designed for eternity; its temporality is part of the way it embodies cultural values. It is, however, physical,

and has beauty and strangeness not possible to grasp without seeing the object. I think Dave Hickey would like it, even though it is conceptual. Hickey has accused conceptual art of being an "academic movement", and, again, I am dismayed by such imprecise language. Conceptual art has changed the way we think about life and art, as abstract expressionism had done when I came into the art world about thirty-five years ago. Abstract expressionism was then heavily promoted by institutions of the sort Hickey calls "dragons", just as conceptual art is now. It's true that there is too much conceptual art now, just as there was too much abstract expressionism then. We have academic conceptual art, and also neo-conceptual, grievance-group conceptual, and simply not-very-good-conceptual. All that will sort itself out in time.

Meanwhile, I appreciate Hickey's calling my attention to the primacy of beauty. I think the work of all the artists in this *Gravure Group* portfolio is beautiful, and also it seems to me to fulfill a criterion for good art John Cage taught me: when we are not with the art, it nevertheless influences us.

—Kathan Brown

Photogravure

Photogravure is an intaglio process in which an image is put on a plate photographically and the plate is bitten to different depths, then printed in intaglio. Different quantities of ink are held in dark or light tones. Aquatint, or some other way of providing tooth, is an essential part of the photogravure process. *Photogravure*, *gravure*, and *heliogravure* all identify the same technical process, but in use there can be shades of meaning. *Gravure*, which was used to describe an early way to print photographs, is still most often used by photographers, while *photogravure* applies mainly to work done by artists who otherwise don't work photographically. *Heliogravure*, which literally means "engraved by the sun,"

often indicates that a drawing or painting has been reproduced using the gravure process. *Rotogravure* is a commercial version of the process, rarely used today.

To make a gravure plate, printers layer either a drawing on transparent material or a positive photographic transparency with a sheet of pigmented gelatin and expose the combination to light. Before using the gelatin, which is backed with paper, the printers sensitize it—that is, make it light-sensitive by coating it with a chemical that causes it to harden where light hits it. During exposure, the gelatin hardens in varying degrees according to the varying amounts of light passing through the transparency. Next, the printers adhere the gelatin to a plate and peel off the backing paper. Then they wash the plate in

warm water, and the soft layers of gelatin float away leaving different thicknesses on the plate.

The next step is to provide tooth by dusting a fine aquatint ground over the gelatin, which now holds the image. In the acid bath, the shadow areas of the image—the parts where the gelatin mostly washed away—begin biting first. This will be the deepest area of the plate and will hold the most ink. The longer the plate is in the acid, the more gelatin is penetrated. The bright parts of the image—which were well protected—are still unbiten when all the other tones in the plate are visible. After removing the plate from the acid and cleaning off the gelatin and aquatint grounds, we can print a full range of tones, created by different quantities of ink being held in the plate.

Exhibitions

October 17 - November 30

San Francisco gallery

Gravure Group - New photogravure prints by **Christopher Brown, Tom Marioni, Gay Outlaw, and Ed Ruscha**

Wayne Thiebaud - New etchings

Karen McCready, Crown Point Press East Coast Representative will be showing our new editions by appointment, please call her at (212) 677-3732.

November 10 - 12

International Fine Print Dealers Association
1995 Print Fair
The Park Avenue Armory
Park & 67th, New York

November - December

Wayne Thiebaud: **Landscapes and Foodscapes**

An exhibition of prints at the Bobbie Greenfield Gallery, Los Angeles

Tom Marioni has an installation included in *Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965-1975*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, (MOCA), the Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles, through January 1996.

Other Crown Point artists in this major exhibition are **Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Joan Jonas, Sol Lewitt, Iain Baxter, and Ed Ruscha.**

Bryan Hunt has an exhibit titled *Twenty Years* at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, through November 11.

Richard Tuttle will be exhibiting at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, through November. He has a concurrent show at the Sezon Museum in Tokyo.

Christian Boltanski has an installation titled *The Work People of Halifax 1877-1982* at The Henry Moore Studio in Halifax, Great Britain, through October 27.

Katsura Funakoshi will be showing at the Annely Juda gallery in London, November 2 - December 16.

Tony Cragg has an exhibit at the Tucci Russo gallery in Turin, Italy, through December.

Markus Lupertz has an exhibit at the Montenay gallery in Paris, through October 28.

Also In The Gallery



John Baldessari, *Hand and Chin (with Entwined Hands)*, 1991. Photogravure with color spitbite aquatint. Paper size: 33 x 22"; image size: 24 x 14". Edition 25.

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