

# Overview

## Bryan Hunt An Expressionistic Surface

When Bryan Hunt visited Nepal twenty years ago, he arrived in Poccara at night and took a taxi from the airfield to the Fishtail Lodge, where he had a reservation. The taxi left him in complete darkness, by a big tree next to a lake. "Then soundlessly a raft appeared," he recounted in a lecture. "An old Tibetan was pulling the rope. He took my suitcase and, after we crossed the lake, he led me by candlelight up a path to the lodge. The next morning at dawn there was a knock, and a voice said, 'mountains in view.' I stumbled to the door to discover that the lake was the floor of a great cathedral."

On the telephone recently, I reminded Hunt of that story and asked its significance. "The earth is small," he answered. "It can be mapped by satellites. It can be seen whole in photographs taken from space. But in it are grand things. What I think I'm trying to express is the energy surrounding those things, the energy that surrounds a mass."

The Hoover Dam, the Great Wall of China, and the Empire State Building are grand things, and Hunt's sculptures of them are large works of art—his Hoover Dam is seven feet high and eight feet wide. But, in this early work, his subjects are so immense that the art cannot help but seem scaled to a human connection. Perhaps because of his awareness of the earth as a speck in the universe, Hunt's art in general, I think, creates concentrated recognizable forms that seem to be within reach.

Bryan Hunt was born in 1947 and grew up in Indiana and Florida where he studied architecture and engineering and interned at the Kennedy Space Center during the program that first sent men to the moon. He went to art school in Los Angeles and, like many other students at the time, experimented with making earth works. "I dug holes and displaced things and put things in the desert in ways a lot of artists were doing," he says. "So much was going on about materials: process art, process sculpture—people were using lead, rubber, latex, string, wire, anything. And bronze had such a bad name. But it's the most indisputable material. And it is something that's classically referential and timeless."



Bryan Hunt, *Cairn 4*, 1998. Color soap ground and sugar lift aquatints with soft ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 25 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ "; image size: 16 x 14". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

One of the sculpture works that first brought Hunt to art-world prominence in 1974 was a clay and concrete wedge representing the Hoover Dam. In that period he also made a bronze version of a section of the Great Wall of China, and a delicate paper and balsa-wood model of a dirigible docked at the spire of the Empire State Building. Hunt told me the spire was originally called a mooring mast and explains that it was put there with the idea of providing a dock for dirigibles like the Hindenburg that were, at the time, a new form of luxury air travel from Europe. "The building's observation tower is where the ticket counter and customs officials would have been," he explains.



Bryan Hunt, *Cairn 3*, 1998. Color soap ground and sugar lift aquatints with soft ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 25 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ "; image size: 16 x 14". Edition 30. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

By the time Hunt came into the art world, Conceptual art was dominant, and art schools had begun producing what are now called "new genre" artists. The true legacy of Conceptual art is that artists can work in any form and use any material, and Hunt, as a young artist, construed this to mean it might be possible—even adventurous—to work in bronze. During the decade of the 80s he developed a series of bronze sculptures of waterfalls that gained him much admiration. He made sculpture of something that's not solid. "I wanted something organic, not industrial," he says. He was too young to be interested in the primary forms and hard edges of Minimal art, and he also doubted that a grand scheme of nature





Bryan Hunt, *Cairn 2*, 1998. Color spit bite, sugar lift and soap ground aquatints with soft ground etching, aquatint and drypoint. Paper size: 49 x 38"; image size: 39 1/4 x 30". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

and life exists. He has always dealt with a shifting, changing world. He creates his sculptures first in plaster or clay—a completely physical activity—and as he works he concentrates on creating “two-dimensional expressionistic surfaces.”

He means just what you think he does when he speaks of an “expressionistic surface.” The track of his hand, the touch of his fingers is everywhere evident, not only in his sculpture but also in his drawings, prints, and paintings. (He is a serious and accomplished painter and printmaker, though he is mainly known as a sculptor.) Expressive as his surfaces are, however, he says he is not talking about *self-expression*, at least in the conventional sense. He thinks of himself as only partly subjective. Nature is his guide. “*Science Times* is my favorite section,” he says. “So much new information is coming in for how we can see things. I think about it. Maybe I can translate it.” Gravity, for example, is something he has thought about a great deal. His new work, which in general he is calling “cairns,” goes beyond the waterfalls to metaphorically release gravity, to set the forms askew.

The word “cairn” means, literally, “heap” in Gaelic, as in a heap or pile of stones. In the United Kingdom cairns are mainly prehistoric monuments, but they can be as simple as a stack of rocks to mark a trail. “Mountain climbers depend on them,” Hunt says. “This is a form that gives me a range of relationships,” he adds. “I’m not thinking too literally. I’m thinking about taking elements of landscape and re-ordering them, re-aligning, or re-assigning their relationships.” Waterfalls are not solid, and cairns (in Hunt’s eyes, at least) are not stable.

In a recent exhibition catalog, Debra Bricker Balken writes of Hunt’s cairns as “imbued with a certain enigma that stems from the seeming naturalness of these amorphous, rock-like shapes.” She sees them in relation to Chinese “scholar’s rocks,” which are found objects placed in prominent spots and mounted on pedestals for appreciation. She sees Hunt’s sculpture, like the Chinese rocks, as “idealizations of nature’s random workings.”

If a sculpture is formed into an idealization, it is a contradiction to call it random, but contradiction is fine so far as Hunt is concerned.





Bryan Hunt, *Cairn 1*, 1998. Color spit bite, sugar lift and soap ground aquatints with soft ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 49 x 38"; image size: 39 1/4 x 30". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

His approach is not intended to be pure. He likes disjunction touched by human expression. Sometimes I think artists are the best guides for helping us find our way through the complications of life. If so, Hunt is the man with the maps. He's mapping energy, or rhythms, not only natural but also man-made. And it is his special insight that the two are often intertwined or indistinguishable from one another.

In the current exhibition at Crown Point Press in San Francisco, twenty years of Hunt's prints are represented, and his easy movement back and forth from man to nature is apparent. The dramatic *Fall with Bend*, a long vertical sliver of a dark waterfall from 1978 is echoed in a smaller print from the same time which turns the water white and the background dark, part of a series called *Ghosts*. This group of mysterious figures is oddly substantial, even though it lives up to its name in being wraithlike and trembling.

Moving into the 80s, there are the *Navigators*, rocket-like forms clearly man-made, balanced on balls and surrounded by energy-laden marks. Different marks, no less energetic, permeate the space around *Vector*, which also could be a rocket, and *Ovoid*, which a

visitor called "that levitating thing." There are several landscapes and many waterfalls. *Window*, a woodcut printed in Japan, is quite realistic. And two additional small woodcuts show the Japanese gods of *Wind* and *Thunder*, Wind wrestling a billowing sack over his shoulders, Thunder brandishing a circle of gongs, both absolutely related to the other work in the show despite the strangeness of the subject-matter.

There are photographs too, taken by the artist in Egypt and produced as photogravure prints along with small softground sketches of similar subject matter. It all sounds disparate, but if you see the show you'll be amazed, I think, at how consistent it is and how wide its range. Its climax is the new prints, the *Cairns*, which seem to jump away from the walls with their energy.

—Kathan Brown

Bryan Hunt is represented by the Mary Boone Gallery, New York City. A sculpture work of his has recently been installed at the White House in Washington D. C.



## A New/Old Thiebaud Landscape

*Hotel Corner*, 1979/1998



Wayne Thiebaud, *Hotel Corner*, 1979/1998. Hard ground etching with drypoint. Paper size: 19 1/4 x 15 1/4"; image size: 12 1/4 x 9 1/4". Edition 35. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Recently we were cleaning out our storeroom and came across an old plate of Wayne Thiebaud's. It was a landscape drawn on thick photoengraver's copper.

We printed the Thiebaud plate to see what the landscape looked like and when he was here working for a few days in December, he pinned it up on the wall and studied it. "It's almost like someone else did it," he said, "But it's interesting." He drew a little water tower on the plate, and a narrow extension to the façade of one of the buildings. "That clamp mark at the bottom seemed to need balancing

out," he said, "So I added the water tower. I think that fixes it." Clamp mark? I thought, and looked closely. It came from holding the plate overhead with a clamp while the printer smoked the wax ground with a candle. The smoke darkens the wax so the artist can see what he's doing. The grounds used to be more transparent—we haven't smoked plates since the 70s, so far as I can remember.

Photoengraver's copper is not only thicker than the roofing copper we use now, it's harder, more highly polished, and backed with an acid-resistant coating. But because commercial photoengraving has been replaced by other technologies, we haven't been able to get that kind of copper for a long time.

We have done further sleuthing in order to date this print. Thiebaud found a hand-worked proof in his studio dated 1988, and we almost settled on 1988/1998. But it didn't seem right to me. Printer Daria Sywulak worked on the 1988 project, and she doesn't remember that image. Even though the proof in Thiebaud's studio might have been watercolored the same year the plate was drawn, it probably wasn't. Thiebaud has lots of proofs in his studio, and he picks one up to color any time he feels like it. Because of the clamp mark and the thick copper, I went back to our Thiebaud prints of the late 70s and found one called *Down 18th* that is stylistically very similar to this print, though this one is sketchier. Since *Down 18th* is dated 1979, we finally settled on that date for *Hotel Corner*.

Whatever the dates, the print is lively. Almost without lifting his tool from the plate, Thiebaud has spun a wiry etched

line into two towered buildings and a row of palm trees with shadows. Then he compressed many lines to make a shadowed street that rises sharply from a delineated intersection. Barely sketched in are two hotels that provide the title. The huddle of stacked buildings gives way to the dense street, which buffers the open space of the palms. We're pleased this delicately balanced print is finally making its way out into the world.

### Notes

#### In the Crown Point Gallery

January 7 - February 27, 1999

#### Bryan Hunt: A Survey 1978-1998

We are pleased to announce the addition of the Braunstein/Quay Gallery to the Crown Point Press building. Braunstein/Quay gallery hours are Tuesday - Saturday, 11 - 6.

**In New York: Karen McCready**, Crown Point Press East Coast representative, will be exhibiting prints and drawings by **Judy Pfaff** through February 27. Karen McCready Fine Art is located at 425 W. 13th Street, New York.

#### Shows and Exhibitions of Special Interest

New photographs by **Gay Outlaw** will be on exhibit at Refusalon, San Francisco through January 31.

New works on Japanese paper by **Robert Kushner** will be exhibited through February 27 at Hiromi Paper International, Inc., Santa Monica, California.

A wire sculpture by **Richard Tuttle** will be exhibited in a group show, *twistfoldlayerflake*, at the California College of Arts and Crafts, through March 20. He will give a lecture January 27, 8 p.m., at Nahl Hall on the CCAC Oakland campus.

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