

Overview

Kathan Brown's Crowning Achievements

by Myriam Weisang

The following article appeared in the April 1988 issue of *San Francisco Magazine* and is reprinted here with permission.

It reads like a Horatio Alger story.

A young American woman, Kathan Brown, travels to London where she goes to art school and studies the marvels of ancient intaglio printmaking techniques—etchings, aquatint, engraving. She returns to America with the burning desire to put her knowledge to good use, bringing a printing press back with her on the freighter.

Upon arriving in Berkeley, Brown realizes that in the United States, intaglio is considered old-fashioned and dull compared to the favored method of lithography. Undeterred, she sets up her press in the basement and invites artist friends to use it. She teaches them that intaglio can produce vibrant, sensual, state-of-the-art prints. She calls the print workshop, Crown Point Press.

One friend who loves the medium is Richard Diebenkorn. The first etching project Crown Point Press publishes is a series by Diebenkorn. The second etching series is by Wayne Thiebaud.

That was in 1962. Today, Crown Point Press is a bi-coastal operation with a gallery in New York and one in San Francisco. The latter is adjacent to the print workshop, which has graduated from the Berkeley basement to two enormous halls in a South of Market warehouse. On a strictly invitational basis, artists are scheduled—one at a time—to work for a two-week period, either in San Francisco or in Kyoto, Japan, where Crown Point Press set up a traditional woodblock program in 1981.

In its twenty-five year existence, the press has printed and published works by such artists as Sol LeWitt, Helen Frankenthaler, John Cage, William T. Wiley, Ed Ruscha, David Salle, Judy Pfaff, and Elaine de Kooning. And this winter, the Museum of Modern Art in New York celebrated Crown Point Press' quarter of a century anniversary with an exhibition of prints.

Not bad for your average rags-to-riches story!

Although Crown Point was single-handedly responsible for (re)introducing intaglio as a viable medium, Brown remains modest about her accomplishments: "We just sort of stuck it out," she says. Others



Printing Judy Pfaff's *Six of One* series of woodcuts.

are more enthusiastic. Pat Steir, a painter who has used the facilities since 1976, states that "Crown Point is simply the best etching press in the country. I love the fact that the shop is all yours when you're here. It allows me to work out a lot of the problems I have in my painting because working in layers clarifies my thinking."

With the help of associate director Connie Lewallen, and New York Crown Point director Karen McCready, Brown selects her stable of artists carefully. In what is perhaps a typical Californian *modus operandi*, she trusts her intuition about the person rather than the work. Her own taste often gets in the way of her judgment, she points out: "I try not to get only people I like because that's another trap and you end up with a group of artists whose works are very similar. I try to meet the artists first, get a feeling for them."

Intelligence is her prime criterion: "Printmaking is more intellectual than painting—someone who's blindly sensual may have problems with it. I like artists who know exactly what they're doing, who aren't stumbling along—even if the work doesn't initially appeal to me."

Francesco Clemente is a case in point. "I actually hated his work when I first saw it in 1979," Brown laughs. "Another artist told me I should pay attention to him, that he was very interesting and that he might be important someday. So I met with him and I knew right away that he was special, and I invited him to the workshop."

Brown likes to establish a steady relationship with her chosen artists: "They come back many times and that's the best way because the first time is usually rather tentative. As they get used to the medium, the prints gain in quality and depth." In the process, one gets to know each artist's particular quirks. As Lewallen recalls, "John Cage threw the I-Ching before making each image. And at one point, he set the plates on fire. There was a bonfire on the press and the whole place was full of smoke!"

The number of works produced by each artist in the two-week segment averages three. Sometimes it can be as many as ten or as little as one. Wayne Thiebaud, for instance, is a perfectionist. "Wayne has been here often but it's very hard for him to

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New Editions

Several old friends and some new ones worked with Crown Point Press over the past several months. Pat Steir created *Waterfall Night*, a dark variant using the same plates as her recently released *Waterfall* (illustrated in our Spring 1988 Overview). In both etchings, and in a series of related monoprints that will be released at the end of the year, Steir creates the illusion of cascading waters.

Wayne Thiebaud added several new images to his rich oeuvre in etching. *Eight Lipsticks* and *Lipsticks-Black* are classic Thiebaud. *Country City* is a large, colorful landscape that merges the steep hills of San Francisco with the lush landscape of the surrounding countryside. The artist plans to do a second state of *Country City* in black and blue.

Richard Diebenkorn produced two new woodblocks in Japan. *Blue With Red* is a subtle play of geometric form and luminous color, dominated by transparent blue. Diebenkorn carved the blocks for *Double X* in Japan while waiting for the printer to make corrections on *Blue With Red*. The result is a bold and vigorous linear composition.

Ed Ruscha returned to San Francisco this spring to produce five etchings, two of which, *Heaven* and *Hell*, combine painterly backgrounds with connotation-laden words. *Jockey* and *Rooster* are silhouetted images of

common cultural signs, while *Hourglass* is a simple and elegant form printed over a field of vertical blue and white brushstrokes.

José Maria Sicilia and Sean Scully worked at Crown Point Press's San Francisco studio for the first time, each creating a major series of etchings. Sicilia, a Spanish artist who lives in Paris, produced five small and three large chine collé etchings in modulated cream tones accented with vermillion. These poetic works exemplify Sicilia's interest in surface incident and texture. In Sean Scully's five, complex etchings, banded fields are inset with opposing patterns. The prints range from the bold juxtapositions of *Wall* and *Room* to the soft harmonies of *Sotto Voce*.

David Salle, April Gornik and Eric Fischl, all working with Crown Point Press for the first time, traveled to Japan to create woodblocks. Salle's *Portrait with Scissors and Nightclub*, utilizes 39 blocks and 11 colors in a layered composition dominated by the haunting image of a woman holding a pair of opened scissors. Gornik's *Charente*, in numerous shades of green, is a serene portrayal of rows of trees reflected in a flooded field in France. Fischl created a characteristically ambiguous figural composition in the blue/green and orange tones of traditional *Ukiyo-e* Japanese prints.

Constance Lewallen

New Issues of View: William Brice, David True, Elaine deKooning, Bertrand Lavier, Judy Pfaff, Sean Scully, Eric Fischl, April Gornik. They are available by mail from the San Francisco gallery for \$6 per issue, prepaid.



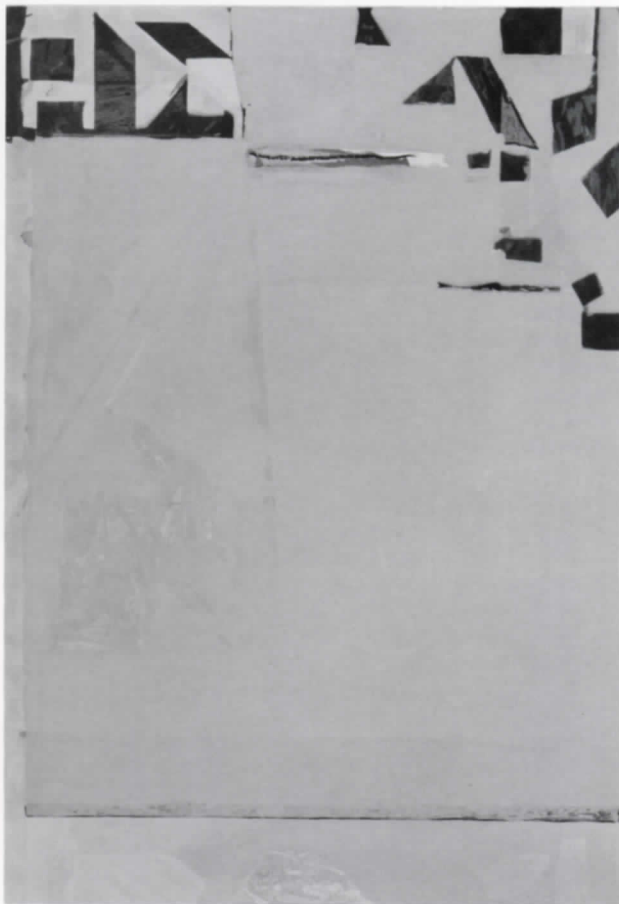
April Gornik, *Charente*, 1988, color woodblock print, 22 1/4 x 28", edition 100.



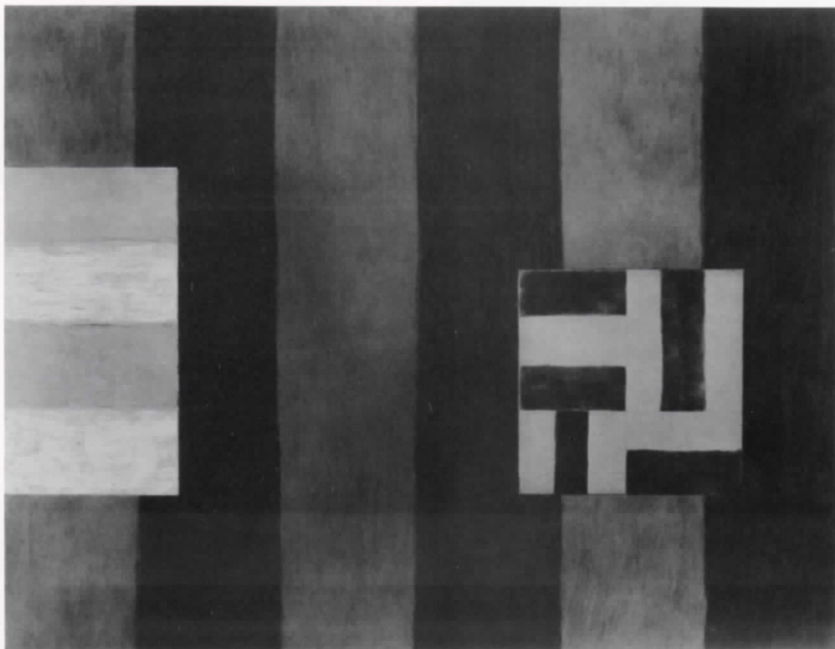
José Maria Sicilia, *Fleur Rouge 7*, 1988, etching with chine collé, 55 x 23 1/4", edition 25.



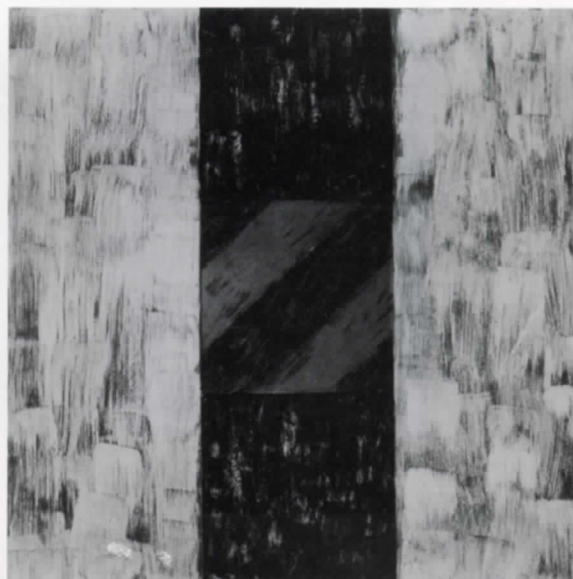
José Maria Sicilia, *Fleur Rouge 3*, 1988, etching with chine collé, $30\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{3}{8}$ ", edition 25.



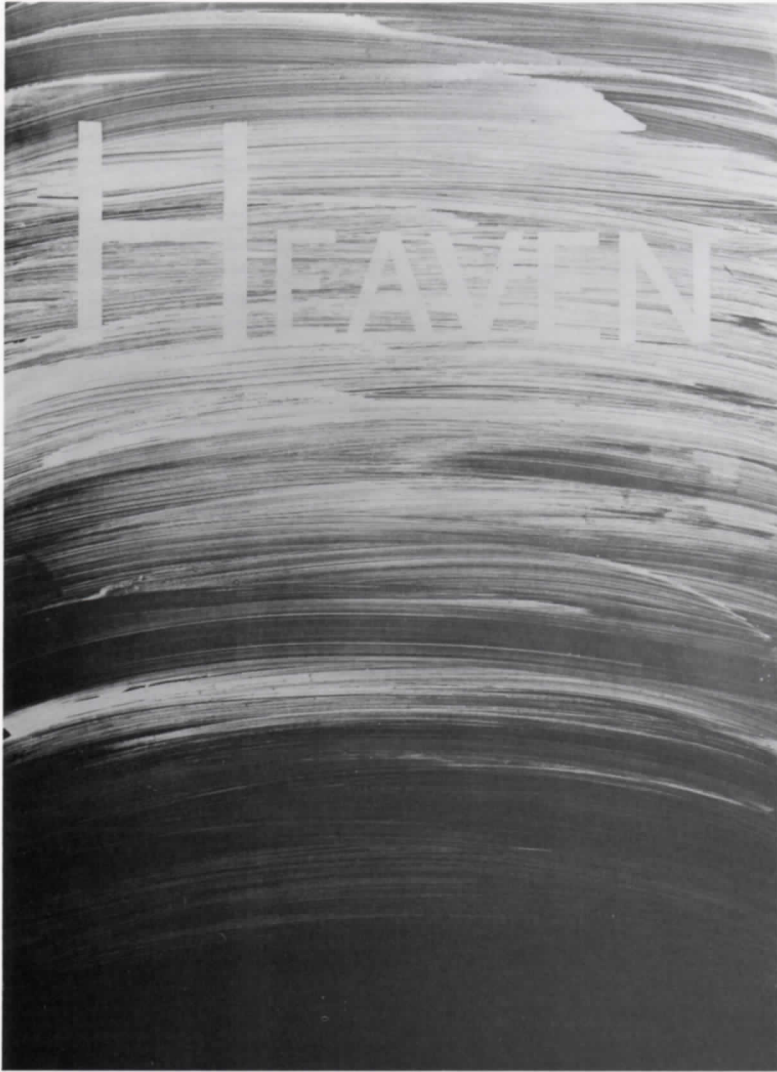
Richard Diebenkorn, *Blue With Red*, 1987, color woodblock print, $37\frac{1}{2} \times 25\frac{1}{2}$ ", edition 200.



Sean Scully, *Room*, 1988, color etching, 42×51 ", edition 40.



Sean Scully, *Square Light I*, 1988, color etching, $34 \times 30\frac{1}{2}$ ", edition 25.



Edward Ruscha, *Heaven*, 1988, color etching, 54 × 40", edition 25.



Edward Ruscha, *Rooster*, 1988, color etching, 44 × 30 1/2", edition 50.



David Salle, *Portrait With Scissors and Nightclub*, 1987, color woodblock print, 24 3/4 × 29 1/2", edition 100.

Dear Friends,

Here we are in a new season, and it seems the buzz word is still "money"—as in *Art in America's* summer "Art and Money" issue and a similar issue of *Art News* soon to appear. It's a curious state of affairs in which money is bemoaned as corrupting to art out of one side of the mouth and, out of the other, celebrated as a reward well earned. In general, I'm inclined toward the latter position. I think of the artists we work with as richly deserving the money that they earn (and they all do earn money, in varying degrees, from their work with us). These are, after all, people at the top of their profession; the handful of people at the top of any profession can be expected to have become wealthy, and this is happening now in art on a fairly wide scale.

Lawrence Rubin of Knoedler Gallery is quoted in the *Art in America* issue I mentioned as saying, "There are no more good artists now than there were 50 years ago, yet there are many more collectors." By "good" he's using artworld shorthand for "internationally negotiable," which it doesn't actually mean, but nonetheless we get the point. I picked up "internationally negotiable" from another interview in the same issue with Joe Helman of Blum Helman Gallery. He says that there are fewer than 150 artists in the world today who are producing "internationally negotiable" works. The precise number and who they are, after the first dozen or so, would be open to the judgment of the individual, but nobody can deny the concept, for better or worse, as a force in the art world today.

I'm putting in my two cents' worth on this because those who think it's worse, the side of the mouth that thinks money is corrupting, sometimes lights on prints as part of this evil. I hear of people who "hate prints" or, as someone recently said, "don't believe in prints," and I think this prejudice



Richard Diebenkorn, *Double X*, 1987, woodcut, 23 x 17 1/4", edition 50.

has to do with money, with a notion (erroneous in the serious art world) that prints are a quick, easy source of money. The number of non-profit organizations seeking to raise money by getting an artist to "make a print" for them is a milder form of this attitude. Usually an organization tries this only once, however, because it doesn't work.

It doesn't work because you can't make money in prints if you're trying to make money. That's true for both publishers and artists.

What you have to try to make is art, with all that that entails. The artist, of course, knows what that entails for him. He knows how to approach the work, what tools or triggers to use to get started. He knows what music to play, what time of day to work, whether to pace or not, to look out the window or not, to receive phone calls or not—how to set himself up so that maybe the muses will come. Does that sound too romantic? I think most artists believe in the muses. The question is whether the printer and the publisher do.

Anyway, we think that our job is to put the artist in a position to do his/her best work. And that's not only giving him technically adept printers and a well-equipped shop, with no corners cut. It's also got something to do with the approach we take to our work. We regard our work as an endeavor.

What the artist takes away from that endeavor (his and ours together) is more

than money: something learned, something understood, something that he can use to inform other work. If he gets that, which means more to him than money, money will usually also come—because the print is alive. If the print doesn't have that spark, people won't buy it and there won't be money made. So, if you try to make money in art, you can't.

Now, having said that, here's a short run-down of what we're working on at Crown Point these days. There will be new etchings by Sean Scully and José Maria Sicilia in both our galleries during October—the Sicilias are ready now, and the Scullys will be signed in December. Wayne Thiebaud is working on a new aquatint cityscape and a "dark" version of *Country City* (which was in the group we released last May). Pat Steir is also extending some previous work. She is making monotypes over the working proofs produced while developing *Waterfall* and *Waterfall Night*. We plan to show these monotypes in December.

We've recently completed large projects in the etching studio with Tony Cragg and Anish Kapoor. These will be in production for awhile, with the Craggs planned for release in February and the Kapoors in May.

April Gornik's woodblock prints will be coming from Japan in October, and Eric Fischl's in January. Robert Moskowitz will be working in Japan in October. Pat Steir will be making a trip to China with me in November. We plan to show the work from our new China project sometime in the early part of next year.

Markus Lupertz is our next artist to be working in the etching studio in San Francisco. He'll be working in October. Other projects scheduled in San Francisco in the near future are Al Held, John Cage, Shoichi Ida, Gary Stephan and William T. Wiley.

So we're busy. Keep in touch.

All best regards,

Kathan Brown
President, Crown Point Press



Wayne Thiebaud, *Eight Lipsticks*, 1988, color etching, 14 x 12", edition 60.

Crowning Achievements

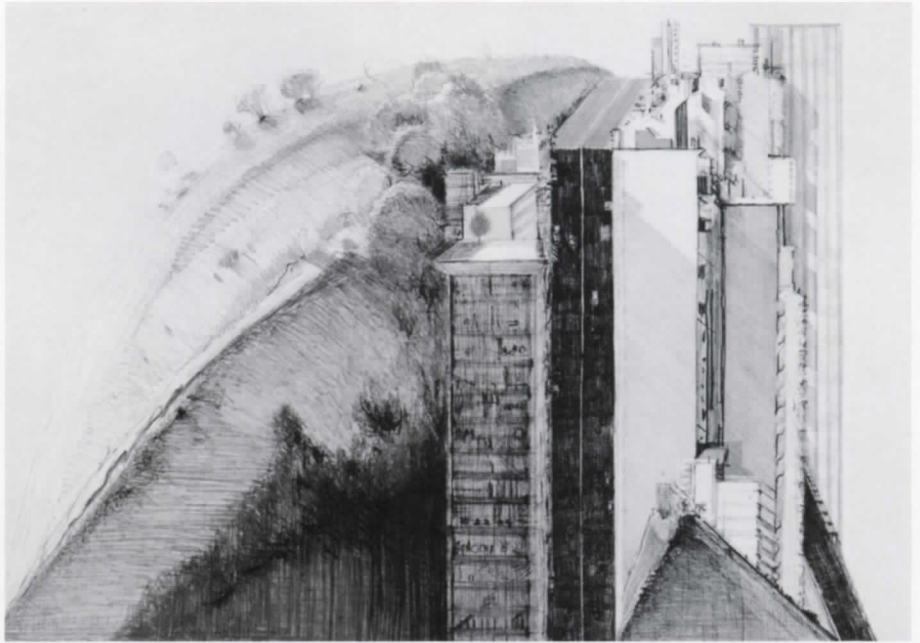
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release the work," says Brown. "He always finds something wrong with it. When he was here last, he finally editioned a piece he started in 1965. 'I'm still trying to get it right,' he'd say. Well, he got it right this time, twenty-two years later!"

Thiebaud, when reached for comments, praised Crown Point Press for its *laissez-faire* atmosphere: "They let artists make mistakes. I've worked elsewhere, and there is always this feeling of inferred pressure which doesn't exist at Crown Point."

Crown Point Press is a successful, steadily growing concern. The San Francisco space is gaining another floor this year. But Brown's greatest reward is the work itself: "The prints take on a life of their own. They're like your children. It's a surprise and a pleasure to run into them out there in the world."

Myriam Weisang is a San Francisco freelance writer. The photographs are by Richard Barnes.



Above: Wayne Thiebaud, *Country City*, 1988, color etching, 30 1/2 x 40 1/2", edition 60.



Left: Wayne Thiebaud working at Crown Point Press in March 1988.

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