

Overview

Marks, Metaphor, and Magic Some Reflections on Art, Life, and Skill

—This essay is based on a talk given by Kathan Brown at several museums during September 1996, to celebrate the publication of *Ink, Paper, Metal, Wood: Painters and Sculptors at Crown Point Press*.

What's the difference between art and life? Here's what I think: in life, you usually get the final exam first, and then the lesson. In art, you get to practice. But what about the artists who don't want to practice, who want to approach each work with new eyes? And what about printmaking workshops, where we provide skills the artists lack? I will try to answer those two questions as we move on.

Most people think skill has something to do with art. I do. When someone becomes very good at something, anything, we call that person an artist—he makes an art of auto repairs, we say, or of cooking. And sometimes we say he repaired the car beautifully, or the food he made is beautiful. It's the beauty part that makes art difficult to grasp sometimes. Skill we can admire, understand. But with beauty, there's that "eye of the beholder" thing. Sometimes beauty seems to be just personal taste, but the beauty of it is that it can be something more. We use that phrase—the beauty of it—to mean there's a new angle, a bonus, an extra use. Like the rhyme from *Johnny Appleseed*: "Here's a handy bonnet! Even has a handle on it. Turn it upside down and you can cook." The beauty of that bonnet is that you can cook in it—or the beauty of that pot is that you can wear it for a hat. This is the kind of beauty that eventually leads to *meaning*, that most slippery element of art, and probably the most important one. Like beauty, it changes, depending on the person on the receiving end. Meaning is mostly what the people of the future will look for in our art, and they will find it—but we can't imagine what the meaning will be to them. If that's true—that meaning depends on the viewer—how does an artist manage to put meaning in?

I think the answer is that meaning can't be put in, or expressed; it has to be discovered. Artists discover meaning much the way scientists do: they test and probe their environment. In order to do this, each artist



William T. Wiley, *Animal Music for the Spheres*, 1996. Color aquatint. Paper size: 51¼ x 40¾; image size: 42½ x 35½. Edition 25.

develops for him or herself an approach. I think nowadays it's called a strategy, an "art strategy." The first thing is to decide which environment to test and probe, that of the personal inner self, or that of the outer world. Most artists nowadays find the outer world more interesting than the inner self. John Cage said that for him self-expression seemed "trivial and lacking in urgency." Of course, turning away from self-expression doesn't mean closing up the inner self altogether. It just means the art-making strategy has a different focus. Once the focus is decided on, the next thing is to figure out how to test and probe. I'll give you some examples of art-making strategies, using the work of six artists, three of whom have editions being released by Crown Point this month.

Wayne Thiebaud once told a group of students, "You've all got your drivers' licenses already. You're already creative. You don't have to worry about self-expression. All you have to do is be good at something." Thiebaud's strategy involves skill. He uses a magnifying glass when he draws, but he doesn't go in for elaborate detail. He often draws the same image over and over, concentrating on what he calls "fine distinc-

tions." Cakes are one of his favorite subjects, and he made "Dark Cake," the woodcut print shown on page 5, in Japan, depending on the skill of our marvelous woodcut printer, Tadashi Toda. In Japan, they don't really have cakes as we know them, and all the while he was working on this print, Toda told me later, he thought it was a picture of a cooking pot.

Pat Steir works very differently from Thiebaud. She flings paint at a canvas—or, in the etching studio she throws acid-resistant ground at a copper plate. She talks about her drawing as mark-making, and deliberately makes it unrefined. She says she is like an ape "dragging a stick in the sand to tell the other apes where the ants are." When she's finished, she gives a work a poetic or suggestive title, like "Sunlight on Water."

William T. Wiley often uses words in his work, and he approaches his words like Steir approaches her marks, putting down impulsively whatever occurs to him at the time, encouraging puns and odd turns of phrase. His drawing, on the other hand, is detailed and delicate, spinning magic out of a subject chosen in advance. In much of his recent work the subjects are figures taken from sixteenth century paintings. In "Cripples Frightened by Cosmic Downsizing" the cripples come from Brueghel. They are cripples, and proud of it. They stand in for us, our own selves in the world of things, and the things swirl by in dizzying plenitude. The things, by the way, are drawn with the help of standard, store-bought stencils.

To Tom Marioni, art is metaphor. A basket of oranges and a Chinese teapot in sunny morning light is titled "The Pacific Rim," and a glamorous evening light suffuses "Manhattan." A third etching in the group shows, he says, eternal light, and is called "Heaven." Each of these works is "about something" but Marioni's strategy is not about interpreting particular things he has seen in the world. He has been studying calligraphy. "Be the bamboo, don't just make a picture of it," the Chinese say. Marioni uses the natural reach of an arm or hand and concentrates on breathing and heartbeat rhythms as he works. This group of prints is part of a series that began with a work called "Drawing a Line as Far as I can Reach."

New Releases:

MARKS, Pat Steir



Sunlight on Water I, 1996. Color aquatint reversal with drypoint and soap ground aquatint.
Paper size: 45 x 44½"; image size: 35½ x 35½". Edition 25.

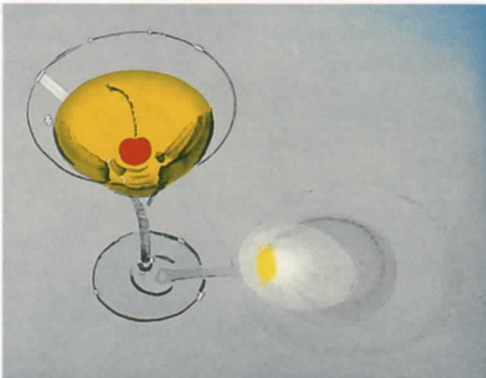


Sunlight on Water II, 1996. Color aquatint reversal with drypoint and soap ground aquatint.
Paper size: 45 x 44½"; image size: 35½ x 35½". Edition 25.

METAPHOR, Tom Marioni



Pacific Rim, 1996. Color direct gravure with aquatint. Paper size: 28 x 37"; image size: 17¼ x 26¼". Edition 25.



Manhattan, 1996. Color direct gravure with aquatint. Paper size: 28¼ x 32½"; image size: 17¼ x 23". Edition 25.



Heaven, 1996. Color direct gravure with aquatint and spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 39 x 25"; image size: 26½ x 16¼". Edition 15.

MAGIC, William T. Wiley



Youth Frightened by Statistics, Time and Speed, 1996.
Color hard ground etching with aquatint.
Paper size: 23 x 16 5/8";
image size: 11 7/8 x 5 3/8".
Edition 15.



Cripples Frightened by Cosmic Downsizing (After Bruegel), 1996. Color aquatint with flat bite etching, soft ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 51 x 41"; image size: 42 x 35". Edition 35.



Uninvolving Chance and to See What Was There (for J. C.), 1996. Aquatint with flat bite etching and drypoint. Paper size: 13 x 47"; image size: 8 x 41 1/2". Edition 25.

(Marks, Metaphor, and Magic continued)

it black. A craftsman might fabricate the whole piece of sculpture, providing skill that is necessary to the realization of the artwork. But the artist puts in the essential part, with a skill developed over a lifetime that involves, I think, a peculiar combination of working without thought and thinking about the work. What's the difference between cooking a good meal and cooking a great one? Well, you don't ever get a great one without analysis and practice, but you also can't get a great one if you're analyzing while you're cooking. Also, if it's your meal, and someone else helps you with it, you might thank them for that, but you probably wouldn't say it was a collaboration, unless they brought the desert, or something like that.

In a way, Thiebaud's right—all you have to worry about is being good at something. At least, that's all you have to worry about for a start, and then, as you move on, "the way to proceed will become apparent," as Cage often said. Tom Marioni once predicted that in the future, "everyone will consider themselves artists, and artists will have to call themselves something else." I think it would be a better world if we all approached it as if we were artists. That is, we would become skillful at something; we would cultivate beauty, and we would devise strategies for discovering meaning in life.

In the San Francisco Gallery

October 19 - November 30, 1996

Marks, Metaphor, and Magic: New Editions by Pat Steir, Tom Marioni and William T. Wiley

The gallery is open Tuesday - Saturday 10-6 and every Thursday evening until 8.

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

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At Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, **Robert Bechtle** will show works on paper in the month of November.

Paintings on paper by **Richard Diebenkorn** will be shown at LA Louver Gallery, Venice, California, November 2 - 30.

New and early work by **Richard Tuttle** will be on exhibit at Sperone Westwater, New York, New York, September 12 - October 26.

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Kathan Brown



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