

Overview

Pat Steir

The Self is Like a Bug

When Pat Steir was in art school in the late 1950s it seemed to her that "abstract, messy images belong to the outer, not the inner world." What she wanted to do was explore the inner world. "I was the researcher and the researched," she has said, "the mystery and the one destined to unravel the mystery." So she worked not in the prevailing Abstract Expressionist style but with literal renderings of birds, animals and figures in symbolic situations.

At some point she came to the understanding that "the self is like a bug. Everytime you smack it, it moves to another place." She had spent six months in 1969 taking photographs instead of painting. "I just wanted to see what the world was beyond the world of my art," she explains. After that, she painted what she considers her first painting, a work she called *Bird*. "It was the first," she explains, "in the sense that never before had I made a painting so selfconsciously as a painting. Not as an attempt to see into a dark emotional state. Not as a plunge into dream-symbol. None of that. With *Bird*, I was suddenly concerned about the medium as well as the subject."

Making Marks

Bird, 1969, contains a small realistically painted bird in a window-like space against a grey sky. In another window area is a column of cumulus clouds, and next to it, on a kind of scaffolding which frames the windows, is a column of what can only be called marks. These short dashes, vigorously executed with a loaded brush, characterized Steir's art for the next dozen years.

Interviewed for *View* by Robin White in 1978, Steir asserts that "the subject of the paintings is painting, so they have to be in paint." "So your work is about painting?" White asks. "No, my paintings are about painting." "And the drawings are about drawing and the etchings are about etching?"

Steir assents to this, then goes on to say she starts with a mark which is "a universal desire to speak or communicate." It does not symbolize the desire, she says, but *is* it. "I think the first cave man's mark on the cave wall was his desire to communicate. It was not a picture of his desire, it was the thing, like somebody tapping, or a scribble in the margin of a book, or an ape dragging a stick across the ground to tell his companion ape where the ants are."

Steir thinks a great deal, but in her art she is not thinking of something and then expressing it. She agrees with John Cage when he said, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it." To follow this approach an artist concentrates on the saying or the

over chaos and for a time I wanted to do the same thing," she says. "Then I realized that each of us imposes order simply by the way we see. ...In the universe, since all things are placed in it equally, we really pick our own foreground and background." Steir laughs, "I'm trying to make chaos clear," then adds seriously, "I mean it really in a scientific sense."

It is almost a commonplace to say meaning in art is subjective, but the possibility of subjectivity in science is something non-scientists are only just beginning to grasp as we gain general notions of the ramifications of quantum physics. In quantum theory "individual events do not always have a well-defined cause," Fritjof Capra explained in a popular book, *The Turning Point*, which came out in 1982. Capra argues that recent scientific discoveries alter our most fundamental conceptions about how nature functions. He says there are no "basic building blocks" in nature and one thing can't be relied on to follow another, to cause or be caused by another. Einstein tried to disprove quantum physics, even though it developed from his ideas. Speaking of it in his autobiography he said, "It was as if the ground had been pulled out from under one, with no firm foundation to be seen anywhere."

Artists are not scientists and they are not see-ers into the future, but the best of them are sensitive antennae of their times. Capra describes the two "major themes" of modern physics as "the conception of the universe as an interconnected web of relations" and "the realization that the cosmic web is intrinsically dynamic." The whole maintains its identity while the relationships of its parts are not rigidly maintained.

An impulse toward the static which became widespread among artists in the 1970s may not be about truth so much as about stillness. The viewer of this art does not track, or logically follow, movement within parts of the artwork. Steir has said her marks are not developing forms in space. Consider her 1978



Pat Steir, 1991, photograph by Leo Holub

doing rather than on what is being said or done. What is being said or done ends up having meaning, but the artist doesn't try to pre-form meaning and then express it.

A Bell Jar Over Chaos

The bird whose portrait Steir painted in 1969 was a pet, a gift from a friend who had built a large cage for it. Steir called the bird and its cage John Cage. Cage's work by that time had become important to her. "Cage had put a bell jar



Pat Steir, *Peony*, 1993, soap ground reversal, aquatint and spitbite, paper size: 54 x 29 1/2"; image size: 44 1/4 x 22 1/2", edition 25.



Pat Steir, *Evening*, 1993, soap ground reversal, aquatint and spitbite, paper size: 54 x 29 1/2"; image size: 44 1/4 x 22 1/2", edition 25.



Pat Steir, *Fern*, 1993, soap ground reversal, aquatint and spitbite, paper size: 54 x 29 1/2"; image size: 44 1/4 x 22 1/2", edition 25.

New Editions

Pat Steir

We don't know if a change is coming in Steir's painting, but the seven images in this new group of prints are different from the waterfall images she has been pursuing since 1988. Two small ones, called *Four Rivers* and *The Nile* are transitional, as they are similar in feel to the waterfall images. And all the new prints employ dynamically falling or dripping paint, as do the waterfalls. But in this work the dynamism is toward lushness and growth. The feeling is that of a summer day in the garden.

Lily, the smallest print, is a simple line image of the flower and leaves of a lily, with the name "lily" written across the page.

The four large prints have garden titles. They share a background plate of a rich, dissolving texture, printed very lightly in some images, heavily in others.

Fern is a spiraling green mark, like a frond unfurling, against a gold background. *Peony* is a dynamic red mark in a loop which doubles back on itself, catching its tail between a divided line and ending with a dramatic burst. The form sits against a beautiful blue background, like the sky.

Radish is five marks against a pale yellow, active background.

Four are lines, three red ones made with a brush and a thin drypoint line printed in blue. The

dominant mark is also blue, with a big dynamic head trailing off as dripped paint slides down to the bottom of the image.

Evening has a lovely umber background with a bright blue horizontal, dripping swath of paint moving across it from the left side of the print near the top.



Pat Steir, *Lily*, 1993, hardground etching with drypoint, paper size: 20 1/2 x 38"; image size: 12 x 29 1/4", edition 25.



Per Kirkeby, *Inventory #8*, 1993, from a portfolio of 18 etchings plus title page. Drypoint, hardground, aquatint, flat bite and soap ground aquatint, paper size: 13 x 10½"; image size: 8¾ x 6", edition 25.

overlaid half with yellow, half with pink. The pink side contains a path winding up a hill, the yellow side scattered rocks, and throughout there are white flecks of the sort you see if you close your eyes after being in bright sun.

Night Thoughts is an image against a dark background of water falling over and swirling about rocks, drawn with rapid calligraphic strokes. *Olive Thoughts* evokes water running downward against an olive-colored field which has a silvery cast, like the underside of olive leaves. In window

openings in the background are green tree-trunks and a blue pond at the foot of a path winding up a hill.

Dark Thoughts contains on one side white tracery, lattice-like, against a black field which shows through to create irregular rock-like silhouettes. On the other side the black is solid, but overlaid with a green line image of a path winding up a hill.

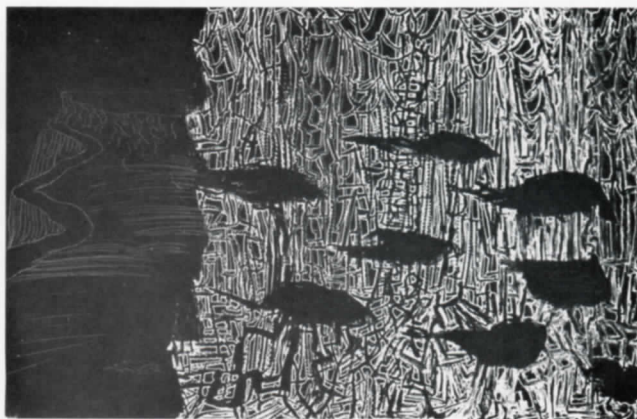
The images are pastoral but active, suggesting the artist's high energy and full engagement with whatever life experiences come his way.

Per Kirkeby

Per Kirkeby was born in 1938 in Copenhagen. He works, to quote a recent review in *Flash Art*, in "freehand drawing, monumental drawings on the ground, painting on wood and canvas, and sculpture in bronze, clay and bricks." In 1987 he had a major retrospective at the Ludwig Museum, Cologne.

New York critic Jed Perl, in *The New Criterion* in May, 1992, wrote of an exhibition of Kirkeby's paintings at the Michael Werner Gallery in New York as making "a beautiful impression." He speaks of the "lyrically abrasive mood" created by the paintings' "jumpy, stop-and-start rhythms and their at-an-angle evocations of the natural world," and goes on to say, "Kirkeby manages to create abstract paintings that have some of the unexpectedness of a walk through a forest." This description perfectly suits Kirkeby's new etchings, especially the portfolio work, *Inventory*. Eighteen small black and white prints and a title page are contained in a cloth-covered portfolio box. Images of tree branches, rocks, striated cliff-shapes, paths and shadows provides a look at the artist's "inventory" of forms often used in his paintings.

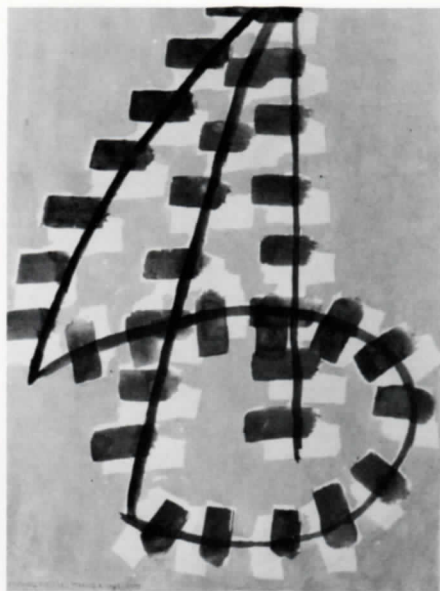
Thoughts in the Sun, *Night Thoughts*, *Olive Thoughts* and *Dark Thoughts* are four larger prints in color, each approximately 30 by 42 inches. *Thoughts in the Sun* has at its center the image of a large eye, on a grey field



Per Kirkeby, *Dark Thoughts*, 1993, crayon resist flat bite, hard ground, relief printing, paper size: 30¼ x 41¾; image size: 20¾ x 32¾, edition 15.



Per Kirkeby, *Night Thoughts*, 1993, soap ground aquatint, drypoint, scraping, relief printing, paper size: 30¼ x 41¾; image size: 20¾ x 32¾, edition 15.



Richard Tuttle, *Trans Asian*, 1993, watercolor woodcut on silk chine collé, paper and image size: 21 3/4 x 16 1/4, edition 30.

Richard Tuttle

Richard Tuttle has completed two woodcut projects mainly executed in Shanghai, China. Qin Yun Hu, a master printer in the Duo Yun Xuan workshop, traveled from China to San Francisco in 1989 for Crown Point's celebration of the opening of our Howard Street building. Also at the celebration was our Japanese woodcut printer, Tadashi Toda. Tuttle worked at that time with both printers on a single image, now being released under the title *Trans Asian*.

The *Trans Asian* image is of three red brush lines spilling down from the top of the page against a bright yellow background. Along the lines are red marks made with a wide flat brush, with similar white marks echoing beside and partly beneath them. Open space for the marks is left in the background, but nothing quite fits into alignment. The white marks are printed on paper by Toda. Hu printed the background and the red image on silk, which was glued *chine collé* to the printed paper. In a recent interview in *Bomb* magazine, Tuttle characterized his work in general as "an effort to make one world out of disparate parts." This print seems to do that, since it was produced in two different cultures which are close to one another yet at the same time are psychologically distant.

The second project is called *Galisteo Paintings* and is a set of seven woodcuts in a white paper portfolio designed by Tuttle. The woodcuts are based on watercolor paintings originally done by Tuttle at his home in Galisteo, New Mexico. The watercolors have been transformed, first by changing the paper from a heavy textured stock to delicate transparent Chinese paper, and second by having the images carved in wood and printed. Tuttle points out that the prints are, in fact, still paintings, since Hu does a kind of watercolor painting on the blocks for each printing,



Richard Tuttle, *Galisteo Paintings* #3, 1993, one of seven watercolor woodcuts in a portfolio designed by the artist, paper size: 12 x 16; image size: 10 1/4 x 14 1/8, edition 30.

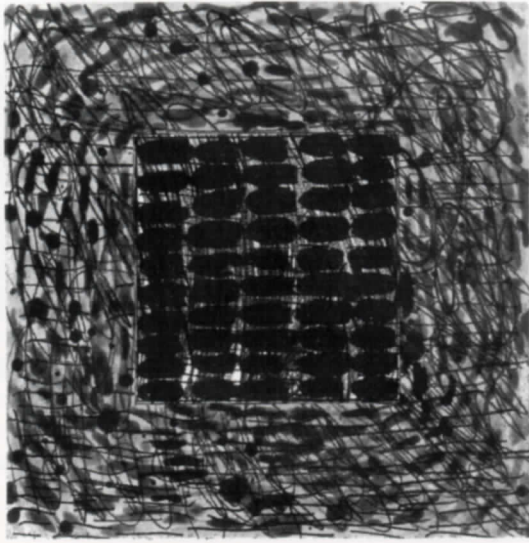
and further hand-painting of the borders is done at Crown Point later. The prints seem more precise and delicate than the watercolors on which they are based. They are sublime Tuttle works, with colorful images in the center of the paper, framed by dark green borders of shiny enamel paint.

Richard Tuttle, who had his first exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1965, is sometimes described as a Minimal artist. But his works are in no way austere. He turns a Zen attitude to a Western context, reducing art to simple elements which are convincing and surprising.

Notes

Christopher Brown will be showing paintings, opening October 5th at the Campbell-Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco. An exhibition of Brown's paintings, drawings, and prints is also planned for November 5 through December 31 at the Yellowstone Art Center, Billings, Montana. An exhibition of **Richard Tuttle's** drawings will open October 13th at the University Art Museum, Berkeley. Tuttle will also have two simultaneous exhibitions at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana from October 2, 1993 to January 2, 1994. An exhibition of **Wayne Thiebaud's** paintings will be at the Campbell-Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco from November 9 to December 18.

Katsura Funakoshi will exhibit his sculpture opening January 6, 1994, at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery in San Francisco. **Robert Kushner** is showing paintings at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, opening on October 16th. The Yoshiaki Inoue Gallery in Osaka, Japan, will have an exhibition of Kushner's ceramics through September 30th. **Janis Provisor** and her husband, artist Brad Davis, will be the first Westerners to teach at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the Fine Art Department. They will have a joint exhibition at Arts Asia in Hong Kong opening November 22nd, and after that will be eventually moving to Hangzhou, China, where they plan to remain about a year.



Pat Steir, *Drawing Lesson, Part I, Line*, 1978, #6 from a portfolio of seven etchings, paper size: 30 3/4 x 41 3/4"; image size: 20 3/4 x 32 3/4", edition 25.

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portfolio of prints called *Drawing Lesson*, one example of which is illustrated here. The marks are individually static but they create a dynamic field, like the pulsing of cells under a microscope or waves in the sea.

On the title page of the otherwise non-figurative portfolio, Steir's marks coalesce to form the self-portrait shown on the back page of this newsletter. Steir says her figures aren't "self-contained images illustrating a feeling. The marks in the field are a collection; together they become the frame. And if I arrange the marks so they look like a figure, it's still the same thing: marks. Life always amazes me, and without any pattern I can perceive, it seems to go on its way, adding surprises, taking them away, giving you gifts you suddenly forget you have. Certainly ideas about a field, a flat field, can include something else."

Traveling in Time

Steir's paintings of the 1980s explored marks made by artists through history. "I wanted to put myself in those shoes," she says. She did a number of self-portraits, painting herself in other artists' styles. The self-portraits, she says, are "making a joke of my own vanity. So there, I'm Rembrandt!"

Steir did a very large etching, *Abstraction, Belief, Desire*, in 1981. Asked if it is a teaching aid, she replies, "No, a travel aid—traveling in time." She was then

living part of each year in Holland, and had begun to study classical art, and also Van Gogh. "Getting onto Van Gogh's mark is like getting onto a merry-go-round, you can't stop," she says. "It's endless movement." Her traveling through painting history, she explains, is "research about connections. The connections are about the components of everything in the universe."

Just in case this talk about the universe is starting to make Steir sound excessively cerebral, it's time to quote her printer, Hidekatsu Takada, concerning *Abstraction, Belief, Desire*. "This was my third project for Pat Steir and my co-printer Peter Pettengill's first with her," Takada wrote in answer to my request for a comment. He continued in this way:

Pat is one of the artists who knows what she wants and what she is doing in printmaking. She can also visualize quite well how each plate will print. After a few plates were made, she said she wanted to work with sugar lift, a technique in which the plate must be kept grease and dust free. After awhile, Peter called it to my attention that the plate Pat is working on is totally a mess. There was some kind of oil from her hands, and she had wiped it off with a cloth or (?). I told Peter this is o.k. Pat Steir is an artist who cannot help touching the

plate with her hands before she makes images. I told Pat many thin films were going to be etched. She said, "I know." It made an interesting etch. All different kinds of marks were created by themselves.

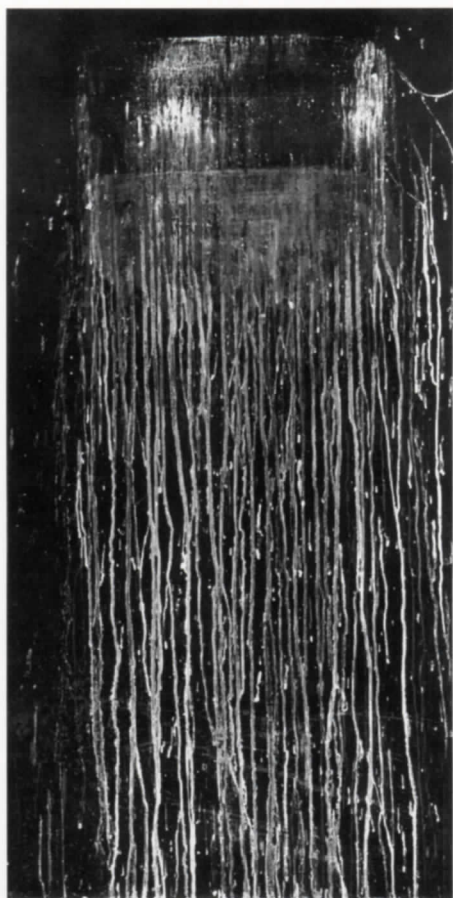
Marks Created by Themselves

Many of Steir's recent paintings have the word "waterfall" in their titles. Although she had done a lot of prints and paintings with themes concerning water and waves, the waterfall paintings came suddenly, all-of-a-piece, seeming as natural to her as touching things. At first, she worked only with black and white. Her mark-making brush became larger, surer, more saturated, and it made marks so full they dripped paint down to fill the canvases. Many films of paint, layers of rivulets and drips, pulse downward and engulf the viewer's eyes. The paintings are very large and, as critic Holland Cotter writes, "the compositions are non-hierarchical, centerless. Scale and space are a product of organic, dissolving forms."

As part of her study of art history, Steir had turned to Chinese painting, in which consideration is given to the spirit so it can flow into the artist's hand and materials. Now, she says she is looking at Tibetan Tanka paintings, "with an image which represents something beyond the image. Tanka paintings contain combinations of colors which trigger meditations. I'm using this Tibetan work as a teacher—for a system and inspiration—not as a research." In her earlier work Steir was intellectually influenced by John Cage, but in her new paintings she is closer than she has ever been to carrying out his advice to proceed by thinking only about what we are actually doing.

Steir often uses printmaking to try out approaches for her paintings. "For years I didn't draw at all but I would go every year to Crown Point and make one or two etchings in which there would always be the idea for the work I was going to do. Often I go with an idea or a half-formed idea of what I would like to be working on in general for the next year, then I form it in the etching and then take it farther later in painting." Her waterfall print series began with an etching in 1988

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Pat Steir, *Long Vertical Falls #2*, 1991, soap ground and spitbite aquatint, paper size: 53 1/4 x 30"; image size: 45 x 22 3/4", edition 20.

that was colorful and complicated, printed with five plates. The most recent waterfalls are, by contrast, very simple and eloquent, white images against a black field. One of these, *Long Vertical Falls #2*, is illustrated here.

In Steir's 1993 print project the waterfalls have been abandoned and in their place are simple marks on complex dissolving backgrounds. Some of these works are shown on page 2. The new etchings are colorful, and though the marks do not resemble those in Tibetan paintings, I think there is a quality of dreaming in them which has some relationship to the ancient works Steir has lately been studying.

Pat Steir was one of the first artists I invited to work at Crown Point Press when I began seriously publishing in 1977. She was the first artist to participate in our Japan program, and one of the first to work with us in China. I trust her judgment and her resourcefulness in any situation. I enjoy her mind and her humor and am always touched by the beauty of her art. We have been friends now for almost twenty years. In that time I have seen art-world respect for her work grow slowly, incrementally, till now she is one of the major painters at work in the world today.

Kathan Brown

— quotes from the artist are taken from interviews by:
Brooks Adams in *Elective Affinities*, Robert Miller Gallery, 1992;
Juliane Willi in *Pat Steir Gravures*, Cabinet des Estampes, Geneva, and the Tate Gallery, London, 1987;
Carter Ratcliff in *Pat Steir Paintings*, Harry N. Abrams, 1986;
Robin White in *View*, Crown Point Press, 1978.

Calendar of Exhibitions and Events

San Francisco and New York:

September 9 - October 16, 1993

New Editions: **Pat Steir** and **Richard Tuttle**

October 21 - November 20, 1993

New Etchings - **Per Kirkeby**

November 25 - December 3, 1993

Group Exhibition

October 9 - 10, 1993

Cleveland Print Fair

Cleveland, Ohio

November 11 - November 15, 1993

Opening November 11, 5-10 PM

International Fine Print Dealers

Association Print Fair

The Armory, New York



Pat Steir, *Drawing Lesson, Part I*, 1978, image from the title page of a portfolio of seven etchings, paper size: 16 x 16", edition 25.

Overview Editor: Kathan Brown
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© 1993 Point Publications
Published three times a year.

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