

Overview

THE NEW CENTURY

Adapted from a memoir by Kathan Brown

Who are the artists of the new century, the young artists new to Crown Point Press in the years between 2000 and 2012? Are there generalizations that can be made about them? With that question in mind, I marked up an article in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, July 22, 2012. It concerns a new novel by Dave Eggers and contains some ideas that seem to fit, in a loose and general way, the artists who have worked at Crown Point lately.

The review of Eggers's book is by nonfiction writer Pico Iyer. He compares Eggers to Norman Mailer and says Eggers, who was born in 1970, is from "a much more sober, humbled, craft-loving time." Iyer sees Eggers's novel *A Hologram for the King* as "almost a nostalgic lament for a time when life had stakes and people worked with their hands, knew struggle." He writes, "A sense of impermanence and possible disaster is always very close in Eggers's work . . . and that is what makes his good nature and hopefulness so rending, and so necessary."

Our artists, in their own studios and ours, struggle and work with their hands, so they don't have the nostalgia Iyer describes (though perhaps our customers do). And a sense of impermanence is recognizable throughout our society. Iyer's third point, however, strongly applies to the group of artists I am styling as members of the new century. They all show good nature and hopefulness.

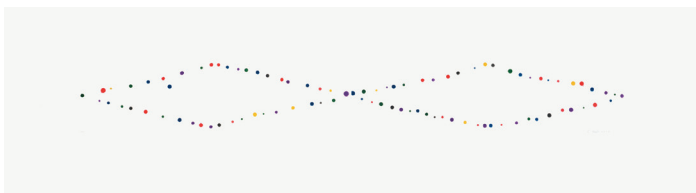
Anne Appleby, born in 1954, grew up in Pennsylvania and at seventeen moved to Montana, where she still lives. Anne's biggest influence is an apprenticeship she served with an Ojibwe elder in Montana. She gained a habit of patient and continuing observation, and her paintings, though they appear to be abstract, are in most cases portraits of plants. Each panel in a painting represents a different part of the plant—a leaf, the fruit or seed, the bud or flower—or the plant in a different season or stage of growth. Anne paints nature changing. "I'm fascinated by the cusp of things," she has said.

Laurie Reid, Gay Outlaw, and Brad Brown all live in the San Francisco Bay Area. Laurie Reid has made a reputation for delicate, large, abstract watercolors, but in printmaking she chose to work relatively small. "Printmaking is imposing in itself," she said. "When I put the prints on the wall, they stood up and stared right back at me." Reid was born in 1964. Gay Outlaw's unusual name is the one she was born with, in Alabama in 1959. She is a sculptor who trained as a pastry chef and began her art career creating a work of sculpture from fruitcake and another from caramel. She also studied photography.

Brad Brown, born in 1964, studied in the mid-eighties at Virginia Commonwealth University, moved to New York in 1986, and then to



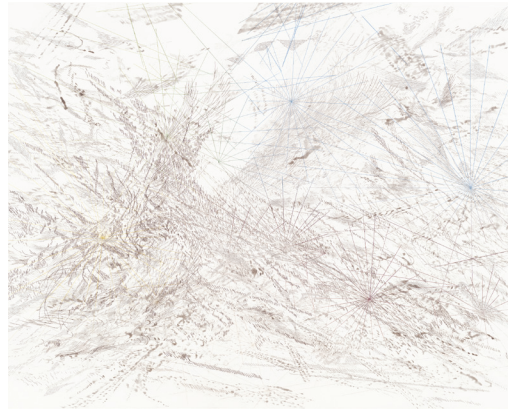
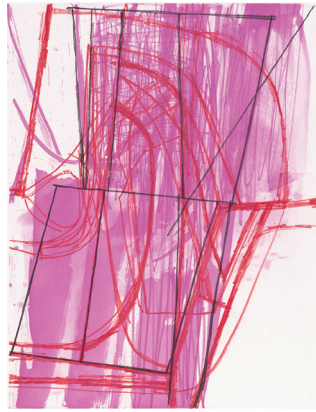
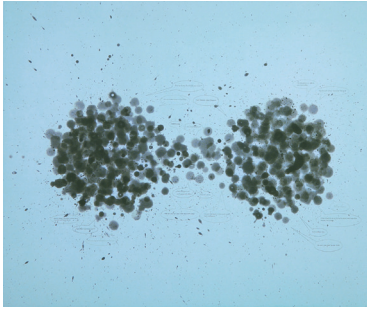
Clockwise from top left:
Anne Appleby, Gay Outlaw,
Laurie Reid, Brad Brown.



San Francisco in 1989. As a student, he told me, he was "surrounded by nihilistic painting, coming out of punk. You were supposed to develop attitude. Everyone was posing. Everyone wanted to get rich and famous, but of course we hadn't done any work to get rich and famous with." He hopes now to make art that is "socially responsible, transformative, and magical," art that "changes daily life." He handles his art casually, allowing stains and accidental marks to accumulate along with the marks he draws, and he often tears large sheets of drawings into smaller pieces that he groups together in random order.

None of these artists seem very concerned about "the continuum," I thought. Then I remembered that Brad once said to me, "John Cage is always in my mind. But so is de Kooning." I told him Cage's story of an argument he once had with de Kooning in a restaurant. There were bread crumbs on the paper-covered table and, drawing a line around them, de Kooning said, "That isn't art."

"But," John explained to us, long ago at Crown Point Press, "I would say that it was." In his eyes, de Kooning had made the bread crumbs art by selecting them and framing them, but in de Kooning's



Clockwise from top left: Fred Wilson, Amy Sillman, Julie Mehretu, Shahzia Sikander, Kiki Smith.



eyes he had made a point, not art. I said to Brad that to me Cage and de Kooning are essentially incompatible. Brad said he hoped to adapt both of them to his own ends. This is different from how my generation learned to pursue knowledge. Ideas come now in bits and pieces, not in a continuum where one idea leads to another or is necessarily compatible with another.

Looking at a list of Crown Point “new century” artists, I am surprised at how few of them are living in New York. Kiki Smith, born in 1954, lives there, is deeply embedded there, but her art is eccentric, not part of a movement with a name. Kiki has made a good deal of art about the body: its makeup, its functions, its fluids, and what inhabiting it feels like. She is also interested in puppets, fairy tales, and animals, and these have made their way into some of her work.

Four more artists on my list live in New York: Shahzia Sikander, Fred Wilson, Julie Mehretu, and Amy Sillman. With Kiki Smith, they bring the number of New Yorkers to five out of the eighteen artists who are new to Crown Point in this century. But even the artists living in New York are less New York-centric than those we have worked with in the past. They are so different from one another, it’s hard to find connections.

Shahzia Sikander was born in Pakistan in 1969. She has lived in this country, mainly in New York, about twenty years. “I think of myself as an American,” she says, “but I also feel that I have a privileged place from which to express things through art.” That position carries a strong undercurrent of possible disaster but, in general, remains hopeful; notice in the illustration on this page that the guns are tied in knots. In Shahzia’s studies in Pakistan before

coming to the United States, she learned “respect for tradition and respect for patience.” She draws precisely, often using a computer to change and reuse an image she has drawn. She employs layers of drawings, frequently juxtaposing loosely painted shadowy figures with images that are uncannily detailed.

Fred Wilson was born in the Bronx, New York, in 1954 and grew up there. His mother was a schoolteacher. “I thought all kids knew about art from their moms,” he has said. He describes his heritage as “African, Euro-American, Cherokee, and Caribbean.” “When I was growing up,” Wilson says, “images of black people were singular and negative. Now they are multi-focal.” The prints Fred made with us in 2004 are literally ink spots, patiently and deliberately created.

Julie Mehretu was born in Ethiopia in 1970; her father is Ethiopian, her mother American. She grew up largely in the Detroit area and still spends a lot of time there. She also spends time in Berlin, though New York is her home base. In a lecture she gave at the San Francisco Art Institute in 2008 during her second project with us (her first was in 2006), Julie spoke, almost as an aside, of “the thing that I’m chasing.” I think all good artists are chasing something in their work, and this group of artists also is unselfconsciously chasing something in life. You could call it “values.” (It is not money, though that—for some of them—has come.) A student asked Julie if she was “an activist,” and she answered, “I think of myself as a person engaged in the world and trying to make sense of it.”

Julie uses both architectural drawing and intuitive marks as structure for her enormous complex paintings. “As marks collide they create other marks, and a community develops in my mind,” she says. Drawing and printmaking are tools that help her think about her paintings. After her first project with us she told me “a painting came directly out of the prints.” In her second project, she did a lot of scraping, erasing, and changing of images she had drawn on plates. “Everything becomes specks or smudges and has to be developed again,” she said, and added, “in New Orleans, Detroit, Berlin, you see that type of erasure happening.”

Amy Sillman was born in 1955 in Detroit, grew up in Chicago, lives in New York and teaches part-time at Bard College, about ninety miles from New York City. She calls teaching “a kind of real politics” and adds that it is “about giving something back.” When Amy worked



Clockwise from top left: Laura Owens, Chris Ofili, Peter Doig.

at Crown Point in 2007, she used aquatint, a transparent medium, in a physical way, punctuating layered washy see-through marks with concentrated deeply bitten passages. She said working this way was like making an experimental film, “the kind that you don’t necessarily storyboard. You go out and just shoot, and then you make sense of the footage in the editing room.” The editing room was the Crown Point studio; Sillman’s etchings went through permutation after permutation before she settled on their final forms.

British painter Peter Doig (born in Scotland in 1959) worked with us in the early part of 2002. During our project he talked about the Caribbean island of Trinidad; he had lived there as a child with his family for a few years and had visited several times since then. Later in that same year, Peter moved to Trinidad with his wife and four children. He is still there in 2012. Every week he shows a film in his studio, free and open to everyone in the community. He usually starts his paintings with an image from a film or photograph, something that seems telling or poignant to him. It’s “like a map,” he says, “a way of giving me a foot into a kind of reality I want.” He has spoken about “collective reality” and about a particular painting as “a memory, a flashback, or a dream.” His work has a narrative feeling but is not linear. Peter’s art is strikingly original and influential, and his move to Trinidad has not diminished those qualities.

The year we worked with Peter at Crown Point, I went to the North Pole, and on that trip I had a layover in London. At the Victoria Miro Gallery, Peter introduced me to Chris Ofili. Chris was born in England in 1968. In his exhibition, “The Upper Room,” were thirteen paintings of monkeys in deep colors, each one spotlighted and supported by two pedestals of elephant dung. (After a trip to Africa, Chris had begun to use the dung in his work—the mayor of New York in 1999, Rudy Giuliani, had a public angry fit over a painting of Chris’s

shown in Brooklyn. It was a painting of a black Virgin Mary with one bare breast made of elephant dung.)

When I walked into “The Upper Room,” I stood there for a moment and I was suddenly happy. Simple as that, and just for a few moments, but it was a memorable and distinct feeling. Of course you were happy then, I tell myself. You’d just been to the North Pole. And that’s true. But the odd quick happy feeling came to me again six years later when I walked into our Crown Point Gallery and saw, unexpectedly, a wall of newly hung images from a series of small etchings Chris had made called *Rainbow*. I stood absorbed in them, feeling happy. “It’s just like the ‘The Upper Room,’” I said to Valerie.

“But I thought that was an installation work,” she said. “Big paintings, bright colors.”

“Elephant dung, glitter,” I continued her thought. “We have none of that. It’s the strangest thing. He’s trapped the same feeling using none of the same means, comparatively no means at all.”

Chris’s project at Crown Point was in November 2008. A few artist friends, including Chris with his wife and two-year-old daughter, gathered in Tom’s and my living room on the night Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. When the count went over the top, we all cheered, the child jumping, clapping, and laughing. Chris moved solemnly around the room shaking hands formally. “Congratulations,” he said to each one of us individually. “Congratulations.”

Tomma Abts, who—like Chris Ofili—won the prestigious Turner Prize, given by the Tate Gallery in London, worked with us in 2009. Tomma was born in Germany and lives in London. In an interview for our newsletter, Valerie asked her if her prints are a synthesis of painting and drawing. She replied that they are not. “I think they occupy their own place,” she said. “The imagery evolved from the etching technique. In the drawings the empty space is the background; it’s just the paper. In my etchings the background has a more material quality. It is, of course, not as material as in the paintings, where there is always an ambiguous relationship between background and foreground.” Tomma’s prints, drawings, and paintings are restrained in size and thoughtful in character.

The biggest print in our “New Century” exhibition is by Laura Owens, done in 2010 in her second project with us (the first was in 2004). The three-panel aquatint, presented in three frames, extends



Mamma Andersson,
Edgar Bryan, Jockum
Nordström, Tomma Abts.



across almost eight feet on a wall. It is an ocean scene with rolling waves, blue sky tinged with pink, dark clouds rolling in and then withdrawing. The space is deep, pulling you into it with a strong physicality. There are little pink stars in the dark clouds. Laura has no embarrassment about “girly” pictures, and her work in general has what she has called “an aura of acceptance of whatever has happened.”

On the Internet I found a photo of a painting of Laura’s using the ocean subject. It fills a very large wall; a person in the photo is dwarfed by it. Sometimes people call prints “poor man’s paintings,” and that’s OK, but it’s more important to me that prints are nearly always human in scale. Laura’s print hangs on my office wall, and—large as it is—I hold my own. The print and the painting, by the way, are related, but they are not the same image. “Anything I start with is just a framework to get going,” Laura told an audience at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—she and I were on a panel discussion there while she was working on the ocean print in 2010. “Once you pull the first proof off the plate, you have to take the plate into account. You can still try to guide the print by using your working drawing, but etching is so specific. It’s more important to be doing etching than to be following a particular work.”

An audience member wondered what “doing etching” means. “You come with a lot of intentions,” Laura answered. “And then you

get working and you start to see what can be done. The more I think I understand etching, the more I see there is a real connection to my painting, mainly because of the layering. But it’s really crazy. It’s really hard. I want things to be very immediate on the plate. So I have to concentrate. What you are drawing on the left is going to be on the right in the picture. You have to take your brain and make it do that with your hand. And then there’s, like, five or six plates!” She laughs, and the audience laughs with her. Laura Owens was born in Ohio in 1970. She lives in Los Angeles, with her husband, artist Edgar Bryan, and their two children.

Edgar Bryan was born in Alabama in 1970. The project at Crown Point in which he did the self-portrait illustrated here was in 2008. That same year, Roberta Smith wrote of his “sweet, sharp meditations” in her *New York Times* review of his first show in New York. Edgar spent five years in the Air Force before attending the Art Institute of Chicago, where he received his BFA in 1998. In his self-portrait he is at a toy easel, happy, working, keeping busy. I think it’s about life, not art.

Our Crown Point Press artists of the new century include another couple with a life together: Jockum Nordström and Karin “Mamma” Andersson. (*Karin* combined with *Andersson* is a common name in Sweden, so Karin shows her art under the name *Mamma Andersson*.) Karin and the couple’s two sons, aged seventeen and twenty-one, visited during Jockum’s project with us in 2008—Karin came back for a project of her own later that year. Jockum was born in a suburb of Stockholm in 1963, Karin in northern Sweden, near the Arctic Circle, in 1962. Both have distinguished exhibition records including one-person surveys at Stockholm’s Moderna Museet. Both are represented by a major New York gallery, David Zwirner. As well as doing an etching project with each of them separately, we also did one in which they collaborated with one another, working together on the same plates. That project was their idea and is surprising because the two of them work from different approaches.

In Jockum’s approach everything is flat. He came to Crown Point with a suitcase full of cut-out paper figures of people, houses, sticks, bugs, trees, furniture, all of them painted with watercolor. He spread them on a table and selected images from that abundance of material, ordering and reordering them, laying out the figures and their props on a sheet of copper, then tracing, redrawing, and aquatinting each one onto the metal. “Images are flat things,” he said. “Collage is a flat way to see the world.”

Karin’s world, on the other hand, is dimensional, inspired by theater and film. We can see that the image here, *Room Under the Influence*, is a stage set—there are curtains at the edges. To her, film and theater register as captured stills—she is unlike Peter Doig, who sees them as moving. Karin’s work has a dreamlike edge despite its apparent solidity; she usually works from photographs, often old ones. “One hundred years ago or a few years ago, it doesn’t matter,” she says. She speaks of a photograph, film still, or theater set as “a small story in a small space. To make a concentrated feeling for something, I have to reduce it to the few small things that can tell a story.”

The story of how we met Jockum and Karin is one of serendipity. Anders Krüger, curator at Grafikens Hus, a printmaking workshop and gallery located in a small town near Stockholm, proposed finding a Swedish artist for us; he would approach anyone we chose. His organization had received a grant to help Swedish artists do projects overseas and would pay the travel expenses. We asked if Jockum Nordström might be available. Working with Jockum later provided our connection with Karin.

In 2005, we brought an artist from China to work with us. Contemporary Chinese art was at a high point of popularity in the Western world—a handful of artist millionaires were created in China at the end of the twentieth century. But underneath radical (for China) subject matter that often mocks the state, the broad brushstroke figure painting of many of the newly famous Chinese painters looks like Russian-style social realist art. It was being taught in art schools when we were going to China in the 1980s, and to me, the art based on it doesn't seem very original.

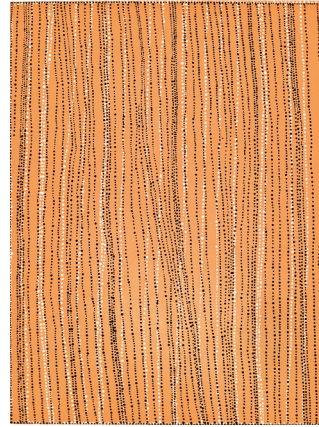
Wilson Shieh is different. He is young, born in 1970 in Hong Kong. His haunting images are so finely and intently tuned that they seem new despite the fact that his technical approach is hundreds of years old. "Before I learned the fine-brush technique, I considered this style as just a kind of antique craftsmanship," he has said. "But, after all, as you can see, I have adopted the fine-brush manner in my work. The ancient sense of beauty looks fresh to contemporary eyes."

At the edge of the Taklamakan Desert in northern China near the oasis town of Dunhuang are the Mogao Caves, decorated over the course of a thousand years, from the fourth century to the fourteenth, by the best artists in China. I have visited these caves and seen there many beautifully preserved paintings in the fine-brush tradition that Wilson Shieh is using. In the fourteenth century as Mongol warriors approached, the caves were sealed. They remained sealed, the paintings protected in the dry air, for the following six hundred years.

The fine-brush technique depends on swelling and thinning lines fluidly and precisely drawn. Many of the caves' paintings are of colorful flying dancers, musicians, and holy men with halos. They guard (as our guide explained) the different territories of people's lives: compassion, knowledge, the future. The Diamond Sutra, the world's oldest printed book, was found in a cave at Dunhuang. It was printed in 868. Here is a stanza from it:

*This fleeting world is like a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a
phantom, and a dream.*

Jiaohe is a ruined city not far from Dunhuang. It grew and thrived for fifteen hundred years from the second century BC until the Mongols destroyed it at the time the Mogao Caves were sealed. Jiaohe today sits in the windswept desert as a vast network of dun-colored mounds, most of them with windows and doors, some with towers, some with niches for storage or for statues. The city is bleak



Dorothy Napangardi, Wilson Shieh.

and deserted, but its heart still beats in the Mogao Caves and in the British Museum, which owns the printed Diamond Sutra and also the Lotus Sutra, a manuscript dated 722, found in the ruins of Jiaohe. Life is short. Art is long. Not only do human beings protect works of art and perpetuate them, but also new art is always being made. If an art style or technique has been set aside, put away, it can be picked up again at any moment, as Wilson Shieh has picked up the fine-brush technique in the twenty-first century and applied it to his way of seeing the world.

Is it possible to imagine an art approach being used today that is even older than the one that Shieh has adopted? Yes! A cave drawing in Australia has been carbon dated as 28,000 years old, and it is similar in style to paintings being done by Aboriginal artists living and working in Australia today. Similar doesn't mean the same, however. Jennifer Isaacs, who has organized shows and written a good deal about this art, makes clear that its forms are not "primordial" but are the "changing and highly responsive art forms of modern non-Western peoples."

In 2004 Crown Point Press published nine prints by Dorothy Napangardi, an indigenous Warlpiri artist originally from the Tanami Desert region of Central Australia. The Warlpiri tradition is loosely called "dreaming"—*jukurrpa* in Dorothy's language—and it describes the origins and journeys of ancestral beings in the land. The art is maplike, identifying sacred spots, places in which the spirits presently reside. Dorothy settled into her style in 1998 when she put aside references to animals and plants and began constructing her paintings entirely of dots.

To wind up this essay, I'm going to talk about four artists who have worked at Crown Point Press in the new century using the old process of photogravure. In the Crown Point studio, Pia Fries combined photogravure with invented hand-drawn elements; John Chiara taped a sheet of film the actual size of his print into the back of an enormous box camera that he transported to an outdoor scene; Susan Middleton made portraits of a plant, a bird, an octopus, and a frog; and Darren Almond captured experiences in Africa and Japan in moonlight and at dawn.

Pia Fries was born in Switzerland in 1955; she lives in Düsseldorf. She is a painter, and in her paintings she often uses flat, silk-screened



Pia Fries, Darren Almond, Susan Middleton, John Chiara.

photo images of paint alongside physical piles of troweled, caked, painted, or smeared actual paint, everything set off against a white background. "I build forms from lumps of oil paint," she has said, "and they do not relate to or mimic forms found in nature." The forms in her prints, she says, came from manipulating the materials of printmaking. "They are not at the service of formal painting issues, or representation, reference, or reproduction."

John Chiara, a photographer, lives and works in San Francisco, where he was born in 1971. A review in the *New Yorker* of his 2008 show in New York began this way: "Long exposures and their inevitable accidents give Chiara's Bay Area landscapes a fogged, dreamy look. The camera is drunk or drugged and can't quite focus." His camera, which he invented and built, is the size of a large closet. He drives it on the back of a pick-up truck to a landscape and usually shoots only a single large-size image directly on photographic paper (there is no negative). He develops the image inside the camera. "There's a noise in the process that I think is revealing and meaningful," he has said. "It's like the failure of memory."

Susan Middleton is a photographer who is also an author, certified diver, film producer, and (with David Liittschwager) the subject of an Emmy Award-winning National Geographic television special, *America's Endangered Species: Don't Say Goodbye*, 1997. Susan was born in Seattle in 1948 and lives in San Francisco. "I consider myself a portrait photographer," she has said. "My subjects are plants and animals, and I hope to evoke an emotional response." To photograph a live wild animal she constructs a "mini-studio" with a plain backdrop, then with patience lures the animal temporarily into it. Her animal portraits are unusual in isolating her subjects; this, she says, lets us perceive them as individuals. She has also worked in museums, and two of the photogravures she made with us at Crown Point are poignant images (one in color) of museum specimens of the extinct passenger pigeon, once the most abundant bird in North America.

Darren Almond is a conceptual sculptor, photographer, and filmmaker who lives in London and was born in Wigan, England, in 1971. He is best known for his *Fullmoon* photographs, time exposures

taken by moonlight, and his work with us includes four *Fullmoon* images photographed after hiking to the headwaters of the White Nile in Uganda (a "seriously difficult landscape to get through," he said).

Darren made two series of photogravure prints in 2010 while he was with us at Crown Point Press. The second was a portfolio of five black and white images called *Civil Dawn*. Over the course of three years, he made several visits to a group of monks who live on Mount Hiei near Kyoto. The monks use running as their meditation, and Darren ran with them.

Civil dawn is the fleeting space of time just before dawn when there is light but the sun has not yet appeared. It is a moment when the monks, standing in the mist rising from the mountain, pause to offer a blessing over the city stretching below them and to put out the lanterns that they have carried through the night.

In 2012 we are only slightly into our new century. What does each of us need to know in order to survive as long as possible, however tenuously? Is there a common denominator that artists are searching for? If so, could it be, as Laura Owens has said, "an aura of acceptance of whatever has happened"? Could it be hopefulness?

In the Crown Point Gallery

"The New Century at Crown Point Press: 18 Artists"

"New Etchings by Shahzia Sikander"

September 5–October 20, 2012



At the M.H. de Young Museum

"Crown Point Press at Fifty", an exhibition in the Anderson Gallery of Graphic Art, October 20, 2012–February 17, 2013

On Friday, October 26 at 7 p.m. Kathan Brown will give a "Friday Nights" lecture in the museum's auditorium. Following the lecture, please join Kathan in the Piazzoni Murals Room for a book signing and celebration of the publication of her memoir. Order an advance copy of the book (\$28) at www.crownpoint.com.

In New York

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