

Overview

Crown Point Press—Workshop as Artist's Studio

"We try to be a sort of supermarket for artists—they can choose any technique off the shelves." That's Kathan Brown speaking. She is director of Crown Point Press, a workshop in Oakland, California that is devoted to publishing etchings by artists who normally work in a range of other media. Many have never previously been involved with printmaking. "I've worked with a lot of people you would never have imagined could do prints," she remarks. "Conceptual artists, performance artists, a composer [John Cage]. Other print workshops hadn't thought to ask these people."

Yet, as freewheeling as her approach is to the artists ("I don't like to have them make drawings ahead unless that's the only way they can work"), when it comes to the nuts and bolts of making things, Brown's standards are strict and traditional. "I've never liked short cuts," she explains. She believes in using a different plate for each color in the French manner, and she is proud to state that her own etching teacher trained with Ambrose Vollard in Paris.

Creating the optimum situation for an artist to figure out what he or she wants to say in a new medium is a delicate business. Brown prefers to hire printers she can train from scratch. "Those who are trained elsewhere have different habits," she says. Her printers are selected for their ability to be helpful without seeming obtrusive, an important consideration because some of the artists are quite unused to working with other people. An artist generally works with two or three printers, who serve interchangeably from one project to another as master printer and assistant. The object is to make prints that reflect the artist's approaches rather than to achieve a specific "look" typical of the press's output as a whole. That this happens is due to a prevailing belief at Crown Point that the artist must understand the process he or she chooses. To this end, printers offer their skills, knowledge of materials, support, sense of adventure and openmindedness to the artists' ideas.

The studio is a loft space situated picturesquely (if not handily for deliveries) up a steep flight of steps. Brown has written: "We have sacrificed efficiency so that artists who come here can know immediately that this is a good place to work, a familiar place, an artist's studio, not a factory. In order to have this space and this light and this view of downtown Oakland, we waste time and motion; to conserve the energy of our spirit we waste the energy of our bodies."

In the beginning—1962—there was just Brown and a \$75 press she lugged back on a freighter from England, where she had been studying. Working out of her Berkeley home, she simply set out "to print and publish etchings for myself and my friends." First publishing only bound books illustrated with prints, she made some solid choices. Books made by Richard Diebenkorn and Wayne Thiebaud in 1965 were the first products of the press. Gradually, when proceeds from print sales were reinvested in the press, the operation became successful. "We pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps," says Brown, who has never received funding from private backers or grants. There are now four printers and a staff of ten, and the studio has been in its present location for twelve years.

Next door, the gallery-office space occupies 4200 square feet in a spacious storefront and former hat factory. Twenty-two-foot high ceilings and a 200-square-foot cathedral skylight provide an optimal space for viewing the work of Crown Point artists. A broad range of etchings is on view in the rear gallery—among them, a series of faint cloud forms by John Cage, a rough-hewn abstract image of a ship by David True, a galaxy of tiny stars on a black background by Ed Ruscha, an enigmatic, scribbly interior scene by William T. Wiley and Joan Jonas' bright blue and yellow image of a dog's head with ideographic mountains and roadways. In the front room, the exhibit is of woodblock prints by Pat Steir, Francesco Clemente, William T. Wiley and Wayne



Shoichi Ida working in the studio at Crown Point Press in March 1984.

Thiebaud. And therein lies a story.

"We had been accused of being elitist," says Brown, "making so few prints in our editions." In etching the small editions are integral to the process, as the plates wear down and making each print is very time-consuming. And the audience for the work the press has produced has generally been small. But the time came when Brown felt that "it seemed time to have something you'd have more of." A larger edition would mean that the gallery could charge less and that more people could own the prints. These thoughts began to crystallize in the idea of finding a traditional woodblock studio in Japan that would work with Crown Point artists. Never having wanted to expand into lithographs or silkscreen ("I don't know enough about them"), Brown felt it was logical to find someone else who could do the woodblock prints with the same level of painstaking attention to quality that is pursued at Crown Point.

It wasn't easy to find a printer willing to take on the work. "They didn't want
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to give up their customers for us," Brown remarks. "And perhaps they were afraid of the avant-garde work. They are very tradition-bound." Finally—through the good offices of Hidekatsu Takada, a Crown Point master printer who was born in Japan and Shoichi Ida, an influential Japanese artist—a master printer from a family which has been making woodblock prints for 200 years agreed to take on the project. So far, it has resulted in five prints (each made in an edition of 100 or 200) by four artists. The artist's drawing is sent to Japan, where it is traced to make the woodblocks—as many as thirty or forty for one print. The resulting proof is considered only a rough approximation ("it's just that all the lines are there"). Then the artist spends ten days to two weeks in Japan working daily with the printer.

Artists enjoy going to Japan, but they also find that spending time at the Crown Point studio in California represents something of a sojourn, an oasis from the complexities of big-city living. Brown disapproves of the fragmented attention spans of artists impatiently waiting for printers to process their images, a situation that tends to exist in the pressure-cooker environment of New York. In Oakland, "the pace is a little slower; they don't have that terrible need to run away once they have the drawing," she says.

In selecting artists, Brown feels she takes "an historical view." The guiding principle is not so much whether she personally favors a particular artist but, rather, is in choosing "people who are influential... the ones who will last." These are the artists whose styles are copied, the artists who influence younger artists.

Despite—or more likely because of—the adventurous quality of Crown Point etchings, the press's customers tend to be a loyal bunch. They have an unusual fringe benefit in the form of Brown's trenchant catalog essays, which explain contemporary artists' philosophies and ways of working in a lucid, down-to-earth style. In *View*, another press publication, extensive interviews provide "a way of hearing the artist speaking,"

(continued on page 4)

Dear Friends,

It has been two years since we've mailed out one of my "dear friends" letters—and a lot has happened to Crown Point Press since then. We celebrated our 20th birthday, circulated two traveling shows, initiated a woodblock print program in Japan, got into (in a way) the lingerie business (or something like that), bought a computer, lost a sales representative with shocking attenuating circumstances, and gained a new representative and a sales director. And of course we continued to make etchings.

For you, our clients, the most significant bit of news in that list is that Karen McCready, formerly director of Pace Editions, has joined us as Sales Director. Karen has been with us since April of 1982, so probably most of you know her by now. She is based in our New York office, but visits Oakland frequently. The Oakland gallery and sales activities are handled very gracefully by Fredrica Drotos. Our record-keeping is enhanced by our new computer—you may not think so if you received a statement with bugs in it, but it is going to make us more efficient and make my job, keeping track of everything, much easier. Please, if you spot any bugs (even minor ones) let us know so we can fix them.

One thing (totally unexpected) the computer has done for us is uncover fraudulent activity perpetrated by our former Sales Representative, Thomas Way. We have a warrant out for his arrest in connection with the theft of many prints. It appears now that he even took home some rejected prints during projects before the printers had a chance to destroy them. These were Diebenkorn's and the RD signature was easy to forge—one print that we have recovered was even hand-colored (not by Diebenkorn)! Way apparently had a side business going the whole time he worked for us. If you bought anything from him personally, or have any other information, please call.

In the two years since you last heard from me we have produced 99 etching editions by 17 artists. We have just released two new prints by Wayne Thiebaud: *Cherries* and *Neighborhood Ridge*. Being editioned are a new com-

plex color print by Pat Steir and a series of 8 works by the Japanese artist Shoichi Ida. These are lovely gestural works, primarily aquatint, printed over and under chine collé translucent Japanese gampi paper.

Our most recent woodblock print is Richard Diebenkorn's *Ochre*; there is another, called *Blue*, in the works. Our woodblock program is explained in the article re-printed in this newsletter, so I won't go into it here. We plan in the next newsletter to include an eyewitness report by Karen McCready. Karen will be going along on our next trip in April. We'll be doing projects at that time with, first, Al Held, and then Judy Pfaff. We expect to have proofs of these works at our booth in the Chicago Art Fair in May.

And the lingerie—well, it isn't exactly lingerie! I intended it that way, originally, but the works turned out so sumptuous that they'll obviously be worn "out". The reprint we've included here gives you a sampling; if you're interested in something call and ask for color photo. We're selling the silks now, each one made by hand to order. They're not signed or limited editions; they're meant to be used. I. Magnin in San Francisco is planning a special promotion around them soon.

Our two traveling shows done in the past two years were *Against the Grain*, a political comment print show, and *Representing Reality—Fragments from the Image Field*. I wrote an essay to accompany the *Representing Reality* show in which I tried to think about some philosophic and cultural roots of the new "expressive" figurative work seen everywhere now. If you're interested in reading the essay send \$2 and we'll mail you a copy.

There's no room for any "philosophy" in this letter—maybe next time.

Very best regards,

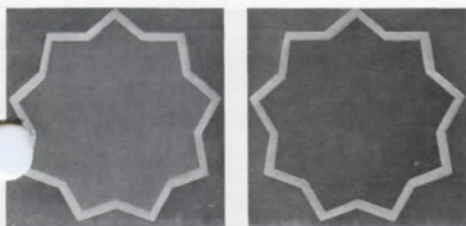
Kathan Brown

Kathan Brown
Director, Crown Point Press

Shown here are a few of the prints published by Crown Point Press in 1983–84. David True, Sol LeWitt, Shoichi Ida and Joan Jonas each did several etching editions; other artists who worked at Crown Point, Oakland in 1983–84 are John Cage, Tom Marioni, Wayne Thiebaud, Pat Steir and William T. Wiley. Projects done in Japan include the illustrated Judy Pfaff print (to be released in October), two woodblock prints by Richard Diebenkorn (*Ochre* which came out in January and *Blue* to be released in July), and—in 1983—prints by Helen Frankenthaler and Wayne Thiebaud. Al Held and Francesco Clemente have work in progress in Japan.



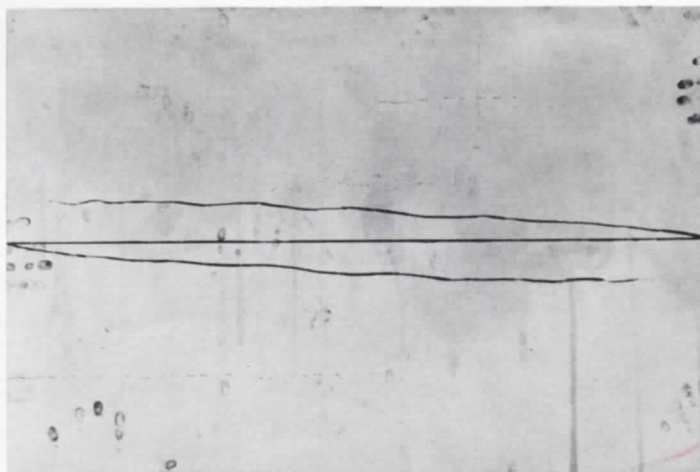
David True, *Savannah Sea*, 1983. Aquatint and spitbite aquatint, 25 3/4 x 33", edition 35.



Sol LeWitt, *Double Stars*, 1983. Aquatint and hardground etching, set of 7, 15 x 27", edition 25.



Judy Pfaff, *Yoyogi*, 1984. Color woodblock, 31 3/4 x 35 7/8".



Shoichi Ida, *Between Vertical and Horizon—San Pablo Ave. No. 3*, 1984. Drypoint etching with chine collé, spitbite and softground etching, 36 1/4 x 46", edition 35.



Joan Jonas, *Double Lunar Dogs*, 1982. Aquatint and sugarlift, 24 x 36", edition 10.

THE SUBTLE SHOPPER/SUSAN SUBTLE



LINEAR ACCELERATION

Abstract yellow, black and gray stripes on this white evening kimono jacket by Tom Marioni simulate "Train Windows" passing each other. \$600.



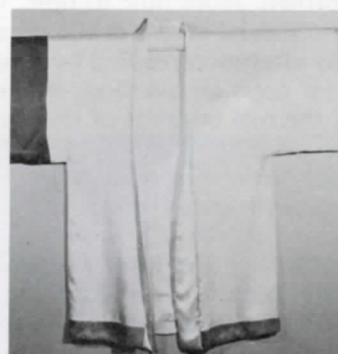
PATRIOTIC PIECE

The ever-surprising Vito Acconci has created this hip-length white kimono coat with sleeves swathed in Stars 'n' Stripes (save for a small Russian flag painted on the inside). \$600.



SILVER HOUND

Magical metallic dog by performance artist Joan Jonas appears on back of dark blue knee-length kimono coat amid galaxy of stars. \$500.



SOPHISTICATED

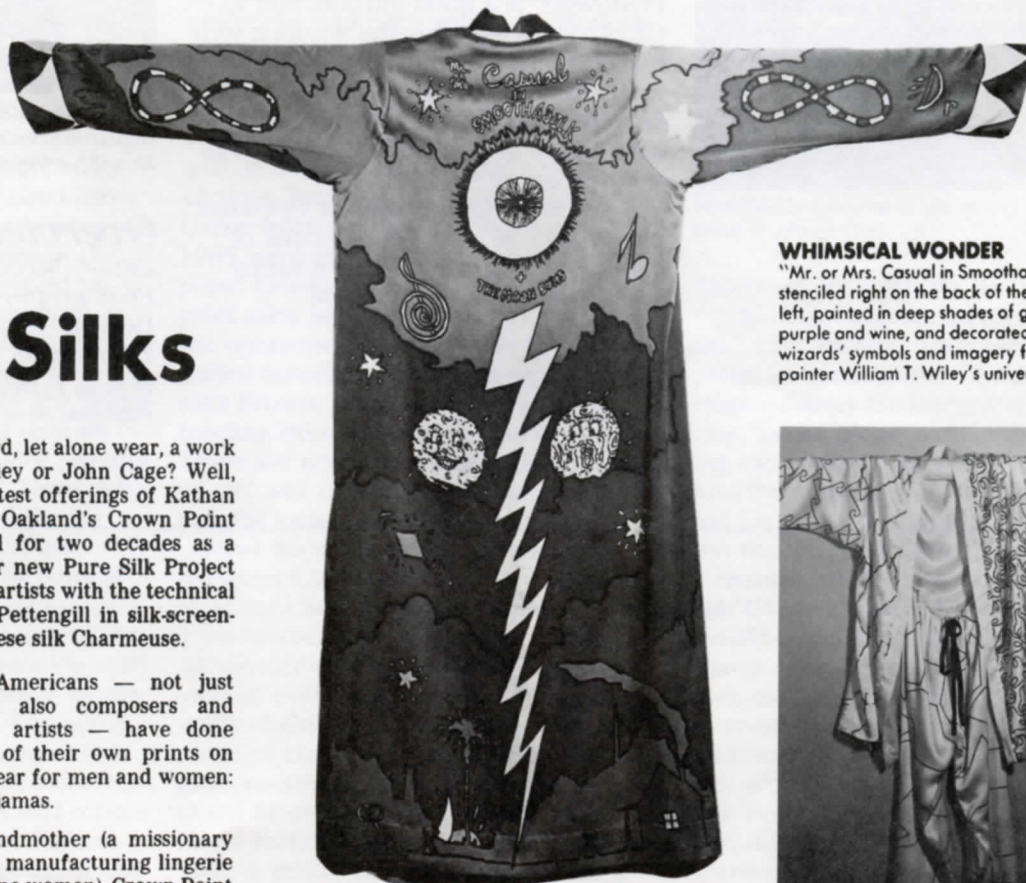
Noted avant-garde composer John Cage's kimono coat is pure white with irregular blocks of muted bone, mauve and gray along sleeves and hip border — their color, size and placement determined by a grid system and casting the I Ching. \$550.

Artists Design Silks

Who said you couldn't afford, let alone wear, a work of art by William T. Wiley or John Cage? Well, now you can, thanks to the latest offerings of Kathan Brown, founding director of Oakland's Crown Point Press, which has been famed for two decades as a producer of fine etchings. Her new Pure Silk Project combines the designs of noted artists with the technical expertise of Deborra Stewart-Pettengill in silk-screening and hand-painting on Chinese silk Charmeuse.

Thirteen contemporary Americans — not just painters and sculptors, but also composers and conceptual and performance artists — have done original designs or variations of their own prints on lounge and evening-at-home wear for men and women: kimonos, robes, jackets and pajamas.

Inspired by Kathan's grandmother (a missionary wife who became a millionaire manufacturing lingerie with applique work by Philippine women), Crown Point Pure Silk presents stylish, wearable, original paintings on cloth by such acclaimed artists as Sol LeWitt, Ed Ruscha, Vito Acconci, for \$500 to \$1000. See the whole show, open 1 to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday (and Saturday by appointment) at the studio, 1551 San Pablo Avenue, Oakland. Phone: 835-5104.



WHIMSICAL WONDER

"Mr. or Mrs. Casual in Smoothassilk" is stenciled right on the back of the robe at left, painted in deep shades of green, blue, purple and wine, and decorated with wizards' symbols and imagery from painter William T. Wiley's universe. \$1000.



DELICATE IMPERFECTIONS

The black lines of Joel Fisher's abstract drawings on handmade paper are transferred onto these chic and cozy white silk karate pajamas that fall just below the knee. \$800.

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says Brown. From time to time, there are also special events at the press. A Sunday afternoon reading by John Cage last year drew an overflow crowd.

But the real business of Crown Point is to marry vision and technique to produce adventurous art. "One of the uses of printmaking to an artist is to shake him up a little," Brown has written. "If I can give a few of these knowledgeable and creative individuals a few more tools to work with and then give some access to their work to a larger, more imaginative public than would know that work otherwise, my evangelical impulse is at least assuaged."

Cathy Curtis

Cathy Curtis is a San Francisco Bay Area arts writer. This article is edited and condensed from *PrintNews* (Volume 5, no. 6, Nov/Dec 1983) published by the World Print Council, and is reprinted here with permission.

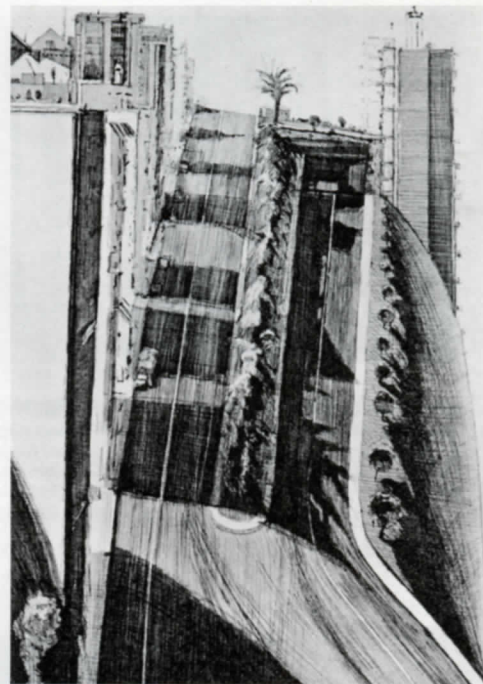
About Overview

People often ask, "Am I still on your mailing list?, why don't I receive mailings anymore?" Particularly missed are Kathan's letters. You may remember them—up-to-the-minute grapplings with the issues of today's art, but chatty and informal too. Our ads in the magazines don't quite involve our friends in the same personal way as those mailings, and so we introduce *Overview*.

To be published three times a year, *Overview* is designed as a way to stay in touch with clients, colleagues and friends. Kathan will write a letter, of course! We will also re-print articles that we've found interesting and informative about our artists, or about prints and printmaking, or about the art world in general. Cathy Curtis' article, which first appeared in a longer version in *PrintNews*, is a good introduction to Crown Point's origins and working style for all our new friends. Mainly we intend *Overview* to be a way for you to hear about our latest editions and projects, a way for you to participate in all our endeavors.

If you would like to receive *Overview*, please send \$5 to cover our costs of postage and handling. Have a happy spring, and do keep in touch!

Wendy Diamond
Editor



Wayne Thiebaud, *Neighborhood Ridge*, 1984.
Hardground etching with aquatint and drypoint,
23 x 18", edition 50.

Overview

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