

OKTP

CHRISTOPHER BROWN

04.01.2008

Christopher Brown was the first artist to work with Paulson Press. This issue of OKTP marks his seventh release from the press. His imagery often explores the area between clarity and confusion. We spoke with him at the press while he was working on a plate and determining colors for one of the new prints.

—Kenneth Caldwell

Q: You have a unique perspective on the relationships between printmaking and art making because you were here at the beginning.

A: To me, art making in my own studio was always such a solitary process, so I was very excited by the prospect of working collaboratively on prints. I knew the etching techniques basically, but working here expanded that vocabulary for me.

Q: How is making prints different from being a solitary painter in the studio?

A: When I'm making a painting, my process is very disordered, intuitive and often even quite illogical: I search for images as I also compose—and continually recompose!—internal relationships like color value, space and form. Painting is not simply a way of making a picture, it

is a way of finding ideas, a way of thinking itself. So I paint whether I have ideas or not.

But etching is not as flexible a medium as painting is, even though it is the most flexible of all the printing methods. When I make prints, I usually begin with a general idea of what I want to do and begin to construct the image in black and white to get the compositional and value relationships right. Then I begin moving into color. In many ways, etching has helped me understand my own painting better.

Q: Does it lead to painting?

A: Not necessarily. It sort of weaves in and out. With etchings, I'm often exploring the side roots off of painting. This series of etchings is coming out of drawings that I've been working on, and I haven't really thought of them as being related to the paintings. But I'm starting to see ways that these prints could lend themselves to some big paintings.

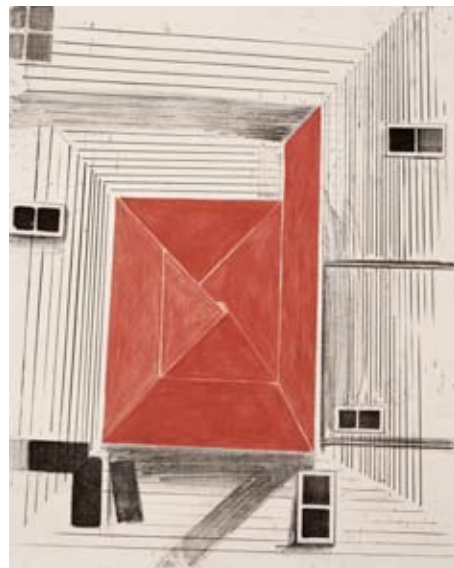
Q: Are there some images that seem to belong more to the prints and some images that seem to belong more to the paintings?

A: You don't really know in advance. You have to get into it deeply enough that you feel like you touched the core. You want to understand the fundamental relationship that makes the image exciting.



Ducks and Eggs, 2007

Color softground aquatint etching with handpainting; Paper size: 22.5" x 26"; Edition Variée 20



Red Square, 2007
Color softground etching,
Paper size: 27.5" x 22.5"; Edition of 20

Q: Let's talk about the imagery. Certain images seem part of a collective awareness, and others seem completely personal. Where do they come from?

A: Many, many sources, including personal experiences, memories, and thousands of photos I've taken since I was young. I also collect postcards and photographs, look through books, read, and get on the Internet. I'm continually asking myself, "What is it about the visual world that is most compelling, and why?" I started out with 19th-century photography, and that led me into other things like the Zapruder film. Is there a relationship between what we know about it and what it looks like? Are we interested in the Zapruder film because it's about the JFK assassination or because it's an amazing piece of film in itself? I think it's both of those things. They're not necessarily related to each other.

Q: What's so interesting to me about that film is that it is reality recorded, and yet we don't know what happened.

A: There are all these contradictions in it, right? From the time I first started making art, I was interested in things being on the edge of visual clarity, in things that would leave open a question of how you would understand them visually. For example, water is the kind of elusive



Corner, 2007
Color softground and aquatint etching,
Paper size: 27.5" x 22.5"; Edition of 20

image I've always been interested in because it leaves a lot of room for invention, and it's an image I've used repeatedly in my work.

I am really interested in the idea of "seeing something out of the corner of your eye." How does that lead you to understand and misunderstand things in reality? I've done a lot of paintings and drawings that are based on the idea of movement, which had a lot to do with 19th-century photography as well because they were long exposure photographs. Things would often be moving. We always tend to think that we know and that everything's clear. Things are not very clear most of the time.

Q: We're always looking for clarity, and then it's erased.

A: Yes, but what we remember is only the clarity. We don't give much credence, especially in our culture, to the confusion and the lack of clarity.

Q: In your earlier work, you captured an idea or moment with a representational image, but in some of the later works, there seem to be more odd juxtapositions of images.

A: In the beginning of any exploration, I tend to paint more realistically as a way of trying to figure out the image for myself



Fenced In, 2007
Color softground etching,
Paper size: 27.5" x 22.5"; Edition of 20

and nail it down in an objective, visual way. Once I understand it that way, I find that I start to become playful with it, and I open it back up, move the pieces around, so to speak, and use exaggeration and distortion to get at its essence.

Q: So some of this imagery we're looking at—the barns, the picket fences, and the horses—where do these come from?

A: I'm not always sure, but these seem to be versions of a world—partly real, partly televised, and partly invented—that I knew as a young boy. Toy soldiers, toy trains, new houses, cowboys...

Q: Are you trying to figure out whether you are interested in a specific image or in a deeper pattern of relationships that create the image?

A: It's a way of asking a question. Why am I interested in that house? Does it catch something in me that was interested in houses when I was a kid, like watching them being built? Am I making these things because I love this linear pattern relationship? This house is also like sitting in school day after day and having lined sheets of paper in front of you on which you're doing lessons, scribbling, and writing notes to your friends. We are looking at the world through lined notebook paper.



Q: What about the window washer?

A: The image itself came out of walking through the streets of New York when I lived there. I'd see these buildings through trees on the sidewalk, and I kept trying to make images that would conflate trees and buildings. I was never really able to do it. Then one day, I impulsively put a window washer into a painting I had begun two or three years before. He's a window washer, clearly, but to me he's also a painter. It's a self-portrait, and his washing is me painting. It's the same thing. I'm scraping, cleaning, clearing, adjusting the surface, looking for clarity. ✂

Clear Sky, 2007
Color softground, aquatint and spitbite
aquatint etching; Paper size: 38.5" x 33";
Edition of 35



Christopher Brown in the Paulson Press Studio.



Statue, 2007

Color softground etching;
Paper size: 27.5" x 22.5"; Edition of 20



Duck Plate, 2007

Color softground and spitbite aquatint etching;
Paper size: 27.5" x 22.5"; Edition of 20

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