Building in a Period Costume, 1978-79



Works by Roger Brown tend to pit powers of highminded intellect and perception against intuition and cultural naivete. The common denominator of his work is Memory of things visual, episodic, current, traditional, and personal--all of which are expressed by this artist who has maintained a fresh and independent point of view in the seething urban bustle and competitive art scene of Chicago. Brown minimizes the achievement, feeling he has merely buttressed his keen sense of observation with an ironic humor, an ethic of self-challenge, and an Alabama heritage. His style has become clearly his own; its developing vernacular, compositional elements. patternizings, implied narratives, and aggressive palette represent a mature personality who has survived a multitude of Chicago extravaganzas including the Hairy Who, membership in the False Image shows, and the Hyde Park Art Center. In his wake have been dozens of imagist followers, whose works fail for lack of definition, touch, conviction, and ability to change.

That a painting by Roger Brown is memorable is no accident. He makes them that way, through years of working toward just the right balance of clear symbolic images and intuitively-sized elements in bilateral compositions. The manic patterns highlight selected objects in the painting, bringing our view to focus on the chosen anecdotal incidents, rather than overwhelming them. The symbolism is accurate and sparse, because the memory edits out the less noteworthy in favor of the essential. Each of Brown's

stimulus and dramatic intention. In this exhibition we could note, for the record: Storm of Assumption--the play of the wind in the trees against a central column relating to his 1978 painting Near Miss, plus any number of resurrection and ascensiontype paintings; Mustangs and Mishap--an actual accident witnessed by the artist; When It Rains It Pours--a close look at southside Chicago residential tracts; Building in a Period Costume-how buildings themselves are stylized adorned pastiches or what a stage scene would look like with actors dressed as buildings, relating to the Chicago fascination with big buildings; and Lake Effect-the nuclear-neon red glow of Chicago with its impossibly clear skyline viewed from the north side. These outlines are only nominal clues to individual paintings which are themselves related to larger groupings of paintings and themes. Such a superficial reading is the necessary first step for any serious understanding of the groups, since Brown works at solving stylistic, editorial, aesthetic, and narrative problems in his hopscotch, back and forth, fashion. New ideas and stimuli are injected with remembered older events or aspirations. The paintings become literal tapestries of effects ranked from bottom to top, foreground to background. The importance of objects is established through color, pattern, and sometimes by an inverse logic of sizing or multiple light sources. The artist freely manipulates these elements in a randomly intuitive fashion, taking full advantage of naive and folk art precedents in a tense blend with Bauhaus design and perception.

paintings has underlying

We know that Brown places particular emphasis on the concept of "decoration," even though it is unlikely that these oddly bright, acid-colored works would ever be considered pretty in a bourgeois sense. The issue is one of rhythms, compositional completeness, and substantiality. Beyond this the artist pushes his palette, silhouette figures, architecture, and apocalyptic sky effects. The prototypes for these interests are diverse and representative of our strong American eclecticism: medieval, gothic and Baroque (i.e., non-Rennaissance) European art; Oriental, East Indian and Islamic art; American Indian, "outsider," folk, fantasy, surreal, and psychotic art, comics; and ethno-graphic arts. The artist's interplay with these elements, all taken at face value without pretentions of social or aesthetic class, has freed him to look, observe, and react.

The shadow-puppet figures are an autographic element common to almost all of Brown's works. People imply a city, of course, as do lighted windows, cars, trucks, and buildings. There is nothing unisex here. One kind of figure is male and the other is clearly female, the artist admittedly evolving the shapes from memories of his parents in their 1940s hairstyles and distinctive clothing. We can also see that their gestures and placements are prime compositional and narrative elements, leading our eye to areas in the painting, focusing our attention to seeming expressions of anguish, surprise, wonderment, anger, etc. But while the figures are shown conversing, we don't know

about what and as voyeurs we intuitively supply our own dialogue. It is an intentional trap set by the artist as he continues to play his theatre of life in Chicago.

Other kinds of works evolve also. He has done paintings which are limited, even risky, in their topical immediacy, such as Fallout at Three Mile Island; Holy Ayatollah, a Persian Minotaur; Jonestown; Museum Without Paintings--A Commemorative of the Opening Show of the MCA. In our madly rushing world these current events are past even before the paint is dry, but Brown finds little need to be conventionally sophisticated because in the folk tradition events are meaningful: the Big Snow; the Big Fire; the Big Freeze; and Washington Crossing the Delaware.

The versatility of Roger
Brown's style keeps us all on
edge, wondering what's next
and how far he can push with
these dazzling, haunting
paintings.

Jack Cowart Curator, 19th and 20th Century Art, The St. Louis Art Museum

This exhibition was originally organized by Jack Cowart for the Currents program of contemporary art at the St. Louis Art Museum. We would like to thank Jack Cowart and the lenders to the exhibition for extending this exhibition to Berkeley. Roger Brown is represented by the Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago.

Works in MATRIX:

Just Around the Corner, 1974, oil on canvas. 91.5 x 304.5 cm. Lent by Seymour Surnow and Dennis Kyte, San Francisco.

Storm of Asuumption, 1978, oil on canvas. 182.9 x 121.9 cm. Lent by Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, Wilmette, Illinois.

When It Rains It Pours, 1978, oil on canvas. 121.9 x 182.9 cm. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Henry S. Landan, Chicago, Illinois.

Mustangs and Mishap, 1978-79.
oil on canvas. 132 x 182.9
cm. Lent by Mrs. and Mrs.
Douglas Cohen, Highland
Park, Illinois.

Building in a Period Costume, 1978-79, oil on canvas. 182.9 x 121.9 cm. Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Peter W. Broido, West Chicago, Illinois.

Lake Effect, 1980, oil on canvas. 182.9 x 182.9 cm.
Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago,
'71, '73, '74, '76, '77, '79;

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine
Arts, '74; Galerie Dorothea

Speyer, Paris '74; Phyllis

Kind Gallery, NYC '75, '77,
'79; The St. Louis Art Museum,

Roger Brown: Currents #6, '80.

Selected group exhibitions:
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Chicago, Chicago Imagist
Art, '72; The Art Institute
of Chicago, Seventy-first
American Exhibition, '74;
XII Bienal de Sao Paulo, Sao
Paulo, Brazil, Made in Chicago,
'74; School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Former

Famous Alumni, '76; Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Improbable Furniture, '77; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, View of the Decade, '77; The University of Texas at Austin, New in the Seventies, '77; Albright Knox Art Gallery, American Painting of the 1970s, '78; Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Pennsylvania, Intricate Structure/Repeated Image, '.79; The Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Some Recent Art from Chicago, '80.

Selected bibliography about Brown:

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Schjeldahl, Peter. "Letter from Chicago," Art in America, vol. 64, no. 4 (July-Aug. '76).

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