The River, Evening, 1984



The landscape dominated American painting throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th, and though it continued to have practioners thereafter (Fairfield Porter, for example), it was overshadowed, along with figurative painting in general, by various styles of abstraction from Cubism to Minimalism. In the last decade or so, however, there has been a revitalization of landscape painting by such contemporary artists as Malcolm Morley, Rackstraw Downes and Jennifer Bartlett (MATRIX 73), who, like Christopher Brown, have discovered its rich metaphorical and expressive potential.

The subject of Christopher Brown's new multipanel paintings is a wooded landscape, crossed by a river, and sometimes including a nude female figure. In these works Brown combines painterly technique with varying degrees of naturalistic representation, a tension in his work that derives from both his academic training and his desire for greater personal expression in his description of images. In a real sense, it is a style and methodology of working that began with his move to San Francisco in 1979.

After pursuing various kinds of painting during graduate school at UC Davis and following that, while living in Germany on a Fulbright grant in 1978-79, Brown moved to San Francisco. He began a series of paintings in which common objects found in his studio--a bowl, a cup, even a baseball mitt--began to fill the canvas. Lushly painted in layers of thinned oil paint that Brown alternately

scraped, sanded and repainted (a process he still uses), these works and the large paintings of heads and vases that followed represented a further relaxing of strict representation in his work as it moved toward expressionism and occasionally abstraction. During this period his work was influenced by the paintings of Jim Dine and the early paintings of David Hockney.

Struggling at that time with issues of content in his work, and the relationship of style to content in particular, Brown began to look at the work of 19th century American Realists, especially Thomas Eakins. Although unrelated to his work at that time, other than through the general interests in description and portraiture, Eakins's early studies of rowers on the Schuylkill River seemed to offer a path toward more specific emotional content, particularly via Romanticism. Brown was also spending a great deal of time fishing in the rivers of the Northwest, and Eakins's work seemed to pose an affinity in content, as well. Returning to his studio after a slow summer of painting and fishing trips, Brown painted over his paintings of heads, gradually developing large water paintings, including The Biglin Brothers (After Eakins), 1982, a large composition that owes its subject of rowers to Eakins's painting of the same name. Yet Brown's painting was closer both to Impressionism and Expressionism in general than to Eakins's Realism.

Though Brown began his current group of paintings with a loose narrative in mind (not unlike the subtle

psychological dramas of Eric Fishl) the paintings became increasingly romantic and expressionistic and less literal as he worked through the series. The landscape elements, particularly the trees, gradually dominated the figures. The trees are the leitmotif, the unifying factor, the rhythmic element that joins one section of the environmental series to the next. In The River, Evening, truncated trees are dark silhouettes marking the foreground of the tranquil scene in which a bather emerges from the river. The shimmering, green surface of the water is interrupted by long, late afternoon shadows and surmounted by reflections of a bright orange sky. In the final painting, Blue Night (The Catskills in Darkness), the trees loom much larger in the shallower nighttime space. Menacing, bare, red and blue branches thickly painted with energetic brushwork traverse the panels while a crouching female figure is nearly obliterated under layers of overpainting. In these night scenes, Brown conveys the eerie sensation one experiences in the woods after dark, a time when trees can take on frightening anthropomorphic shapes, as in a child's nightmare.

Brown was born in 1951 in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He received a B.A. from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (1972) and an M.F.A. from UC Davis (1976). He spent a year in Germany in 1978-79 on a Fulbright Fellowship. Brown lives in Oakland and has been an Assistant Professor in the Department of Practice of Art, UC Berkeley, since 1981. The works included in this exhibition are part of a

larger project to be shown later this year at the Madison Art Center, Wisconsin, and will travel to the Cincinnati Center for Visual Arts, Ohio, and the Laguna Beach Museum, California.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

- 1. The River, Evening, 1984, oil on canvas, 96" x 144" (two panels).
- 2. October, into Night, 1984, oil on canvas, 96" x 183" (two panels).
- 3. Blue Night (The Catskills in Darkness), 1984-85, oil on canvas, 96" x 353" (4 panels).

All works are lent by the artist, courtesy of Gallery Paule Anglim.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

de Saisset Art Gallery and Museum, University of Santa Clara, CA, '79; Gallery Paule Anglim, S.F., '80, '82, '83, '84; American River College Art Gallery, Sacramento, CA, '83.

Selected group exhibitions:

The Oakland Museum, CA, New Images--Bay Area, '79; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Fresh Paint, '82 (catalogue); Kirk de Gooyer Gallery, L.A., '83; San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, CA, '84.

Selected bibliography (see also catalogues under group exhibitions);

Atkins, Robert. San Francisco Bay Guardian, Sept. 25, '80.

Albright, Thomas. "A Skillful Orchestration of Colors," San Francisco Chronicle, Jan. 26, '83.

Kelley, Jeff.
"Christopher Brown,"
Vanguard, April '83.

French, Christopher. "A Reliance on Style," Artweek (Oakland, CA), Jan. 26, 1985.

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