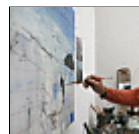


Catching up with painter Christopher Brown

Sam Whiting, Chronicle Staff Writer

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At age 42, painter Christopher Brown resigned as the chairman of the department of art practice at UC Berkeley because he wanted more insecurity. Now 59, he teaches one day a week at the California College of the Arts.



If you want to find him otherwise, you have to pound on the door of his studio, an old printing plant in the North Berkeley flats. He has no phone and there are no windows, except in the ceiling, which casts a brilliant light as you sit in a paint-splattered chair he found on the street.

Q: Describe your workday?

A: I try to get in at least six hours of painting seven days a week.

Q: Always work in the studio?

A: During November and December I was set up almost every day on Fifth Street for an hour or two of plein air painting. I'll paint houses under construction, water puddles, trucks parked on the street, windows.

Q: Fifteen years ago you told me that "the goal of an artist is to always be a beginner." Still feel that way?

A: Yeah, I do. That's what plein air painting is about, starting from the bottom, where you just go outside like a regular Sunday painter. I'm painting this stuff just to increase my visual acuity and improve my color sense.

Q: Latest project?

A: I'm doing all these snow paintings, based on movies that I've been watching that have snow in them. I've been getting my brother, who lives in Providence, R.I., to send me photographs of the deep snowfall they've been having this winter.

Q: Is that considered middlebrow, painting from pictures and movies?

A: To me it's the way that almost all artists I know work today. That's the nature of our visual experience now. The mediated world is as common as the natural world.

Q: Have people said you look like a younger Jerry Brown?

A: I once was picked up by a cabdriver in San Francisco. He said, "Let me see your license." I showed it to him, and he said, "I knew it. You're related to Jerry Brown. This ride is free." I said, "I'm not." He said, "Don't even talk to me. I know that you are."

Q: Where did you grow up?

A: Urbana, Ill. It's a college town.

Q: First job?

A: In seventh grade I was hired by a grocery store to put handbills in front-door mail slots every Saturday morning. After that, I had a paper route for the Urbana News-Gazette.

Q: How did you get to California?

A: I came to graduate school at UC Davis. I would ask all the visiting artists who came to the University of Illinois, "What are the best graduate schools?" And they said, "The best one on the East Coast is Yale and the best one on the West Coast is UC Davis." This was 1973.

Q: Why Davis?

A: It was known for the faculty. People like Wayne Thiebaud, William Wiley, Robert Arneson, Manuel Neri, Roy De Forest. There were all there. It was really intimidating.

Q: What did you think of Davis?

A: It was the Midwest. It was tomato fields all over again.

Q: Ever regret leaving that tenured faculty position at Cal?

A: It's all for the better. I believe in the idea of insecurity. I won't say I like it, but I think it's important. You learn more from it, and the nature of being a person in the world is about some degree of insecurity.

Q: What are you insecure about right now?

A: I have an upcoming show in October in New York. It's hard to talk about because I don't know what it will be. I practice a lot, but when it comes to making a painting, it just all happens spontaneously.

Q: What museums collect your stuff?

A: Most of the museums around here, Oakland (Museum of California), San Francisco (Museum of Modern Art), the de Young, Berkeley (Art Museum). In New York, there is the Metropolitan (Museum of Art).

Q: What's it like to walk into a museum and see one of your paintings up?

A: It's flattering, but it's always a little embarrassing, too. You always think, "I could have done that a

little better."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/03/31/DDBH1HPC8U.DTL>

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