



CHRISTOPHER BROWN

A Different View

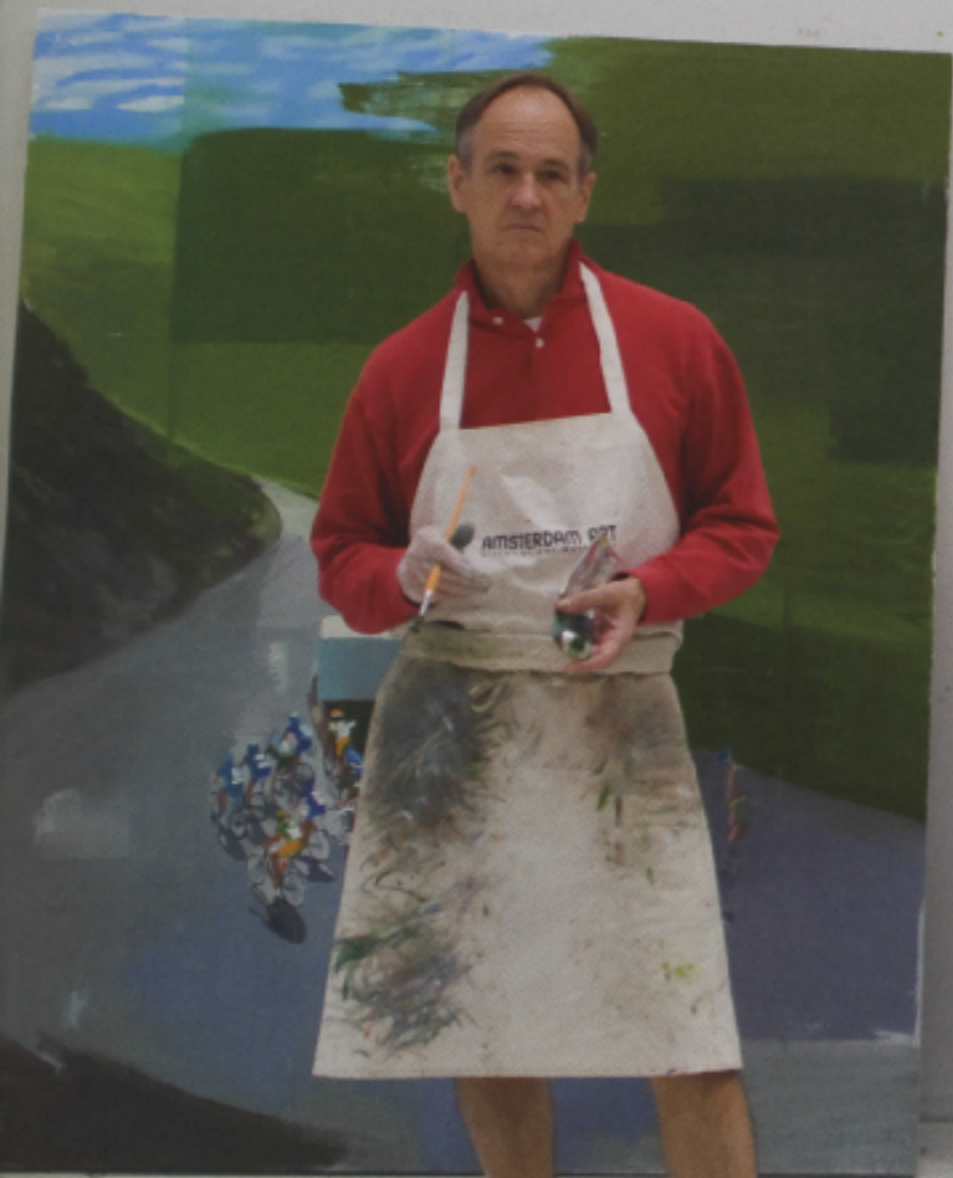
BY ERIN CLARK

PHOTOGRAPHY PHILIP RINGLER

Life and art sliding along a spectrum between order and chaos – too far to one side and all structure is lost and the possibility of descending into an unsalvageable mess is very real, and too far to the other side and all spontaneity and joy is suffocated, constricting creativity to the point where dull becomes the only applicable adjective. Finding a balance between the two extremes seems a noble goal, but Bay Area artist Christopher Brown will tell you it's not that easy. For him, the ever-changing slide between the two is what's important. "With my students I can look at their work and always put them on an exact spot on the scale," he says. "The challenge is to expand the range – the distance between the two and move on the scale. For me, the struggle is how to operate with greater chaos." Take a stroll through his Berkeley studio and you begin to understand what Brown is saying. The struggle is essential to his art and, in many ways, to his life.



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Brown's studio is in a large warehouse with soaring ceilings. He is getting ready for a show, so it is full of paintings, arranged in a fairly orderly fashion. On the far wall is "the work space" where the piece that is the current focus of Brown's attention is mounted. His palette table is close by, littered with paint tubes, paint soaked rags, tools, brushes and left over drips and drabs that give the whole thing an abstract painting feeling in its own right. While this part of the studio is clearly where the artist works, the paintings hanging on the other walls offer an incisive look into Brown's process. There are several canvases covered with images of marching bands. Brown likes the symmetry and repetitive structure of a band, and it is intriguing and visually pleasing, but the canvas really comes alive when Brown deconstructs the original image, adds others, plays with space and perspective, and generally "rewrites" the visual story. "I'm always looking for a greater form of personal expression," he says. "It's the difference between a great short story and a police report. One gets the facts but not the feeling. I want something more evocative, so I push my painting. Sometimes I can push a painting over the edge and ruin it, but I think it should be capable of greater expression, so I reach for more. Maybe a better way to describe it is that I pay a price sometimes, but I truly believe that to make a good painting, I have to push."

If there is a recurring criticism of Brown's work it is that he sometimes doesn't know when to stop pushing. Critics say some of his exhibitions, and in some cases individual pieces, lack coherency. When asked about that he smiles and says with a shrug, "Guilty as charged. I think a good metaphor for my work is that my paintings are like pages in a journal – not necessarily a coherent story, but sincere, honest and open – illuminating without self-absorption. I'm not always sure what my work is about. There are many narrative threads – many subject matters, but they are all about me trying to express something personal." Brown's need to revise is legendary. It is not unusual for him to paint over a canvas many times. "When I make the first change, it (the painting) usually goes downhill, and then I have to work to bring it back. Some-

IMAGES: Previous and this page, Brown working in his studio, Berkeley, CA.



times I have to hit rock bottom with a painting where I feel there is nothing good about it, and then I start back up the mountain. Then, it gets exciting again." Like an addict who can't give up the rush, Brown may do this several times with one painting. It is both emotionally draining and exhilarating, but it is the only way he knows how to work.

Brown was born in 1951 in Camp Lejeune, a Marine Corps base in North Carolina, but he is no military brat. His father, a doctor, left the Marines a few years after Christopher was born and the family moved first to Ohio, and then later to Illinois where they would put down roots. Christopher's Midwest upbringing has had, and continues to have, a profound impact on his art. "So much of my visual imagery dates

back to my childhood – things I did as a kid," he explains. "We lived near woods, and I would ride my bike through the forest. At the time, it was scary and exciting. At eight years old, you are forming your vision of the world, and as the years go by, you layer on top it. My paintings are like that." Brown's early art education started with Saturday morning art classes, and then later in high school when his mother de-



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manded he take a "real class" instead of study hall. "Once I took the class, I really liked it, and by my senior year I had worked it out so I had a three hour block of art in the middle of the day. I knew this is what I wanted to do." After graduation, Brown attended the University of Illinois, majoring in art. "While I was there they brought in a lot of visiting artists, and I would always ask where I should go to graduate school. Everyone

said you have to go to one of the coasts. At the time, the two big art schools were Yale on the East Coast, and Davis (University of California) on the West Coast. I think a sense of adventure took me to California. I wasn't a rebellious kid, but I really wanted to get out of the Midwest. I remember how disappointed I was when I got to Davis. It was flat with tomatoes growing everywhere. It looked, to me, just like the Midwest.

It was not the vision of California I had in my head," he laughs.

IMAGES: Opposite page, *A Natural Cubist*, 2010, oil on linen, 80 x 75 inches. This page, *The Big Race*, 2010, oil on linen, 80 x 60 inches.



The Sacramento Valley may not have been the place of Beach Boys' lyrics, but it was something of an artistic haven. Wayne Thiebaud, Roy De Forest, Robert Arneson, and Manuel Neri were among those on the faculty at UC Davis at the time – slightly intimidating for a kid from a small town in the Midwest. "It was a difficult period for me. I was just inundated with information, and it was easy to lose your sense of identity. It was like going through a maze. It was daunting, and there was a lot of pressure. At Davis they had these serious reviews. If they thought you weren't cutting it, you could get kicked out. Two people did get kicked out when I was there. I don't know how I made it through because I thought my work was terrible," he remembers. It was a time of discovery for Brown, both on campus and off. After one year of graduate school, Christopher took a year off to explore Europe. He spent several months in both Spain and Germany, learning the languages and cultures. "For the first time, I really experienced

living on my own – learning to be on my own completely," he says.

After graduate school, Brown set up shop, briefly, in Woodland, an old farming community outside of Davis, and got his first taste of teaching by working part time at the American River College in Sacramento. He did that for a year before moving on to San Francisco where his standard of living dropped tremendously, but the artistic opportunities outweighed the discomfort. "I lived in a warehouse in the Mission District, and it was crude living. You could literally see through cracks in the wall. You had to wear a jacket all the time just to stay warm." But he was painting, getting noticed and even writing art criticism for *Artweek Magazine* in Oakland. In 1960, he got his first solo show at the Paule Anglim Gallery. He also started a 13-year teaching stint in the studio art department at the University of California at Berkeley – the last four years as Department Chair. By 1994, though, he

had had enough of big time academia. Frustrated with the internal politics, and tired of fighting an administration that he believes is looking to phase out the art department, Brown left Berkeley to concentrate on his own work, although he continues to teach part-time to this day.

Brown spent the summer getting ready for a show at the Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco this fall. Preparing for an exhibition is stressful, especially for an artist who likes to re-work pieces like Brown does, but on the other hand, deadlines force the issue. Although often referred to as a figurative artist, the description is misleading. While his work certainly includes figures, it also challenges our usual expectations about space, depth and perspective. They are not abstract paintings. In fact, Brown

IMAGE: *First Study*, 2010, oil on linen, 30 x 45 inches.



"Sometimes being cross-eyed and seeing blurry is a more interesting place to be," he says. For Brown it is always about seeing the world from a different perspective.

is adamant about using recognizable things in his work. "I can't do abstract expressionism. There is not enough meaning for me," he says bluntly. "I'm trying to express something, but I don't know what it is before hand." The process of painting is a journey of discovery for many artists, but for Brown even more so. Think of it as a roller coaster ride through his artistic landscape, where he finds the emotion he is looking for while still trying to stay in his seat. As he often does, Brown reverts to the literary metaphor to explain his process. "There is speaking in complete sentences – a painting that people can understand. And then there is expressing extreme emotion like a scream. The dilemma for artists is to find a way to speak in complete sentences and still scream. Great artists can do it."

So as he works and re-works canvas after canvas, that is the goal – to speak and scream at the same time. He is most successful, even by his own account, when he can let go of the rigid constraints of representational painting.

He points to one almost completed piece in his studio – a large piece where abstracted figures share space with telephones and cameras. It's called *You See What I'm Saying*, but when he says it out loud, Brown runs the words together adding a slight New York accent, so it comes out sounding almost like a challenge – "Ya see what I'm sayin'." You may or may not see what he is trying to say, but there is a surreal quality to the piece that makes you at the very least contemplate the idea that the visual impact can be a powerful communication tool, however the viewer chooses to interpret it. In another piece depicting a bike race, two circles focus on two bike racers, as if the viewer is looking through binoculars. Some of the image is mirrored, giving the viewer a vague sense of being cross-eyed, and the rest of painting is blurry. For Christopher this represents the dilemma of seeing. "Sometimes being cross-eyed and seeing blurry is a more interesting place to be," he says. For Brown it is always about seeing the world from a different perspective.

As this magazine goes to print, Brown's studio is, for the most part, empty, and all the work now hangs in a downtown gallery. Brown has traded one kind of stress for another. Much like a hopeless romantic (and eternal optimist), Brown wears his heart and his art on his sleeve, so to speak. So even after thirty years of one exhibition after another, the idea of putting the work "out there" always prompts a certain amount of angst. "I feel relief and resignation, and a certain amount of despair," he says. "It's both wonderful and embarrassing." Soon enough, though, he will be back in the studio where he will begin again. On the order to chaos scale the beginning is always orderly, but Brown knows the push to the other extreme is where he will find his creative exhilaration, and ultimately his best work.

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IMAGE: *A Gardener's Notebook*, 2010, oil on linen, 85 x 60 inches and 18 x 14 (diptych). Above, Christopher Brown at work.