



The Figure:
Two Bay Area Artists

Christopher Brown
Viola Frey

Feb. 23 - April 3, 1992

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Christopher Brown

Born in 1951 in Camp Lejeune, N.C., Christopher Brown received his bachelor of arts degree from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana in 1972. In 1976, he earned his master of fine arts degree from the University of California at Davis where he studied under Wayne Thiebaud. Brown lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and is currently a professor of art at the University of California at Berkeley.

Since his days at the University of Illinois, Brown has investigated the evocative power of the human form. While he has explored both abstraction and realism, it is the figure that emerges as a recurring motif and unifying theme in his work.

The paintings featured in this exhibition span the years 1986 to 1990 and include examples from several bodies of work. *The Stripper's Rise*, 1986, evolved from earlier paintings that depicted the image of a figure in water. By 1986, however, Brown's figures appear to be standing in pools of water with their heads barely above the surface. Silhouetted against luminous bands of color that allude to the rippling surface of water, his "heads" shift between seeming transparency and solidity and are often echoed by shadowy reflections. These images appear both dream-like and immutable and are simultaneously sensuous and disquieting.

Black Lanterns of 1987 is from a series of works that contain objects associated with China. Brown's depictions of paper lanterns (similar works feature the heads of Chinese soldiers, pagodas, cups of tea, etc.) are juxtaposed against red and yellow bands that are reminiscent of his earlier "water" paintings. Here and there, vestigial, head-like shapes and ghostly faces punctuate Brown's striated surface.

For his most recent works, Brown used photographs taken during the Civil War and at Gettysburg during Lincoln's address as his point of departure. Discovered by Brown at the Library of Congress, these photographs are laden with historical associations, and the scenes he depicts are imagined from these blurry images. *November 19, 1863* (1989) and *Bivouac* (1986) feature both Brown's predilection for views from ele-



Christopher Brown, studio view
Photo credit: M. Lee Fatherree

vated vantage points, and his preoccupation with figures in a crowd.

An aura of solemnity and anonymity pervades these paintings – a sense of isolation that crowds of figures cannot dispel. Brown's figures seem to perform

their assigned duties and fulfill their appointed destinies in silence. They appear to emerge from and then dissolve into textures and scumbled surfaces.

His paintings invite speculation regarding political, social, and aesthetic concerns. As John Yau writes:

"Viewed through Brown's eyes, the relationship between the anonymous and the specific, the abstract and the realistic can also be seen as a larger rhyme connecting the Civil War to contemporary society, which must constantly strive to avoid war and address the deeply rooted problems of a decaying post-industrial society. By linking the Civil War with the present, the artist also reminds us that civilization is always on the brink of crisis, and that once certain forces have been set in motion it may be impossible to derail them."¹

1. Yau, John, *Christopher Brown, 1989-1990* catalogue preface, Gallery Paule Anglim, 1990, p. 9.



November 19, 1863, Christopher Brown, 1989, oil on linen, 104" x 105",
Collection Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Museum Purchase,
The Anne Burnett and Charles Tandy Foundation Endowment Fund

Viola Frey

Viola Frey's fascination with the human figure is a hallmark of her artistic expression. Well-known for her monumental clay sculptures, whether single figures or figural groupings, Frey has also produced a significant body of dynamic, two-dimensional works that are the primary focus of this exhibition.

Born in Lodi, Calif., in 1933, Frey grew up on the family vineyard where both her grandfather and father were compulsive hoarders of junk (old machinery, vic-trolas, television sets, etc.). Thus, the stage was set for Frey's own eventual assemblage of a vast collection of inexpensive figurines – objects that would serve as a primary source of inspiration for her work.

She began her formal artistic training at Stockton Delta College in 1952, but transferred to the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1953 where she majored in painting under Richard Diebenkorn. Three years later, after receiving her bachelor of fine arts degree, she moved to New Orleans to pursue her master of fine arts degree at Tulane University, studying under George Rickey, Mark Rothko and others. While at Tulane, ceramics quickly became Frey's favored medium, although painting continued as a major interest.

"Probably what consciously attracted me to clay initially was that it utilized the disciplines of painting and drawing as well as sculpture. It is unlikely that I would have moved from my painting background into, say, bronze casting. The challenge of dealing with paint that would, when fired, assume a totally different quality, intrigued me."¹

After Tulane, and a brief period in Porchster, N.Y., Frey returned to the San Francisco bay area in 1960 where she has continued to live and work. Since 1970, Frey has been a professor of art at California College of Arts and Crafts.

Frey's works on paper vividly demonstrate her prevailing interest in scale, color and emotional states. She immerses her figures in a world of objects and activity and employs intense color and radical shifts in scale to fragment her compositions. Her drawings express an exuberance and sense of invention that distinguish them from her sculptures, and they also reveal a narrative quality that is



Viola Frey, studio view, Oakland, 1987
Photo credit: M. Lee Fatherree

more difficult to discern in her sculptural work.

Recurring motifs in Frey's drawings include doorways or windows (often with a grandmother figure peering through), images of figurines, classical sculptures and flowers. In her two-dimensional works, women are generally nude and are drawn from studio models. Her men, however, are often in suits – what Frey refers to as "power suits."

Frey's imposing, larger-than-life figural sculptures transform the spaces they occupy and command our immediate attention. While their restrained gestures and middle-class attire should be com-

forting to us, we experience instead a sense of unease with their hulking presence and unnatural color. *Fire Suit*, a male figure from 1982-83, possesses an almost menacing quality. Bedecked in a suit of brilliant red and orange glaze and exhibiting a harsh stare, he seems to have just emerged from the heat of Frey's kiln. Her use of color on her sculptures imparts an emotionally charged state to her figures and emphasizes the interrelationship between her two- and three-dimensional work.

"The use of color on these sculptures increases their dynamic qualities. Their interior structure and self-signification is intensified; their exterior demand on their environment and on the observer is insistent."²

In both her drawings and works in clay, Frey's figures appear isolated – seeming victims of the maelstrom of contemporary life. They pursue individual tasks and thoughts – apparently oblivious to the events swirling around them.

1. Clark, Garth, *Cracks in the Sidewalk: A Chronological Study of the Art and World of Viola Frey*, Crocker Art Museum, 1981, p. 9.
2. Ibid, p. 10.

Essays: *Bruce Hartman, director
Gallery of Art*



Artist Studio Diptych #7, Viola Frey, 1990-91, pastel on paper, 41 1/2" x 59",
Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, N.Y.

Exhibition Checklist

Christopher Brown

November 19, 1863, 1989

oil on linen, 104" x 105"

Collection Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Museum Purchase, The Anne Burnett and Charles Tandy Foundation Endowment Fund

The Stripper's Rise, 1986

oil on canvas, 72" x 147"

Collection General Mills Corporation, Minneapolis

Belle Plain, 1990

oil on linen, 72" x 60"

Collection Laura Lee Deters, Lyndon, Ky.

A Third Detail, 1990

oil on linen, 48" x 40"

Private Collection, Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim

Blue Light, 1990

oil on linen, 32" x 32"

Collection Billy Bragman, San Francisco
Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim

Untitled, 1989

oil on linen, 80" x 80"

Collection Roselyne and Richard Swig, San Francisco

Bivouac, 1986

oil on linen, 72" x 96"

Collection Merrill and Sybil Conn, San Francisco,
Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim

Black Lanterns, 1987

oil on linen, 96" x 108"

Collection John and Mary Schelling, Orinda, Calif.,
Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim

Viola Frey

Western Civilization Drawing #3, 1987,

charcoal/pastel on paper, 44 1/2" x 60 1/2",

Private Collection,

Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, N.Y.

Artist Studio Series Triptych #2, 1991

pastel on paper, 41 1/2" x 89"

Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, N.Y.

Artist Studio Diptych #7, 1990-91

pastel on paper, 41 1/2" x 59"

Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, N.Y.

Studio Model Series, 1990

pastel on paper, 42" x 30"

Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, N.Y.

The Book Series: I, 1990

pastel on paper, 44" x 60"

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Berey

Untitled, 1990

pastel on paper, 83" x 59"

Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco



Untitled, Viola Frey, 1990, pastel on paper, 83" x 59", Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Untitled, 1990

pastel on paper, 44" x 30"

Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Fire Suit, 1982-83

ceramic, 98" x 32" x 23"

Collection Byron and Eileen Cohen

Acknowledgment

We are deeply grateful to Christopher Brown and Viola Frey for their cooperation with this exhibition.

We also extend our sincerest thanks to the numerous individuals who assisted with the organization of the exhibit. In particular, we wish to thank Ed Gilbert of Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco; Jim Harris of Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco; Sique

Spence of Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York; Donald McNeil, curator, General Mills Inc., Minneapolis; and Rachel Wright, registrar, Museum of Modern Art of Fort Worth.

Finally, we are indebted to the many private collectors who so generously loaned works from their collections. Without them, the exhibition would not have been possible.

*Bruce Hartman, director
Gallery of Art*

Cover: *Blue Light*, Christopher Brown, 1990, oil on linen, 32" x 32", Collection Billy Bragman, San Francisco

Johnson County Community College
Cultural Education Center
12345 College Blvd.
Overland Park, KS 66210-1299