

Roger Brown, 55, Leading Chicago Imagist Painter, Dies

Roberta Smith

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Roger Brown, a leading painter of the Chicago Imagist style, whose radiant, panoramic images were as passionately political as they were rigorously visual, died on Saturday at Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta. He was 55 and had homes and studios in Chicago, New Buffalo, Mich., and Carpenteria, Calif.

The cause was liver failure after a long illness, said Phyllis Kind of the Phyllis Kind Gallery, which has represented Mr. Brown since 1970.

In the late 1960's and early 70's, Mr. Brown was one of a number of artists whose interests and talents coalesced into one of the defining moments in postwar Chicago art. The

inspiration for these artists came from European Surrealism, which was prevalent in the city's public and private collections; contemporary outsider art, which the Imagists helped promote, and popular culture, recently sanctioned by Pop Artists. In addition to Mr. Brown, these artists included Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Phil Hanson, Ray Yoshida, Karl Wirsum, Barbara Rossi and Gladys Nilsson, almost all of whom he met as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and each of whom braided the city's disparate cultural strands into a distinctive hybrid of figurative styles.

Mr. Brown's hybrid was a powerful combination of flattened, cartoonish images that featured isometric skyscrapers and tract houses, furrowed fields, undulating hills, pillowy clouds and agitated citizens, the latter usually seen in black silhouette at stark yellow windows where they enacted violent or sexual shadow plays.

Formally dazzling, instantly legible and psychologically charged, this style, which solidified in the early 1970's, adapted to numerous themes and spatial concepts and yielded what were often caustic morality plays masquerading as luminous, beautifully composed paintings.

These works communicated a dour view of humanity in strangely cheerful patterned forms, but usually with an undercurrent of foreboding, at the least. The most violent were images of earthquakes, nuclear accidents and other catastrophes, as well as searing commentaries on current events ranging from the mass suicides at Jonestown to the attack on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Tex., to the O. J. Simpson trial. Other subjects included skeptical treatments of Presidents and military leaders; biblical themes that came naturally to an artist reared as a staunch Southern Baptist, and even more personal works concerning homosexual love, or critics Mr. Brown felt had treated him unfairly.

Roger Brown was born on Dec. 10, 1941, in Hamilton, Ala., and grew up in nearby Opelika, expecting to become a preacher. After high school graduation, he enrolled in Bible school at David Lipscomb College in Nashville, but a life drawing class at the University of Nashville diverted him toward art. He moved to Chicago in January 1962, studying first at the Art Institute, then at the American Academy of Design, before returning to the Art Institute to earn a bachelor's degree in 1968 and a master's degree in 1970.

At the Art Institute, students were encouraged to make their work as personal as possible by Mr. Yoshida, who taught there, and assigned to study ethnographic art at the Field Museum of Natural History by Whitney Halstead, an art historian who also showed them the work of Joseph Yoakum, a self-taught artist then living on the South Side. Mr. Brown found Yoakum's obsessively patterned landscapes and flattened space inspirational, while also admiring works in the Art Institute's permanent collection by Georgia O'Keeffe, Edward Hopper, the Italian primitives, Henri Rousseau and Rene Magritte.

Also important to him was the vast range of art and objects that he ceaselessly acquired, first in Chicago's flea markets and thrift shops and, as his wealth increased, from art dealers. Mr. Brown amassed enormous holdings in outsider and folk art, in African and Mexican art and in the work of his contemporaries, as well as countless artifacts of popular culture. One of his favorite possessions was a classic 1968 Mustang.

Starting in the mid-1960's, the artists in Mr. Brown's circle gained attention through Don Baum, an artist, teacher and curator who, as director of the Hyde Park Art Center, organized such exhibitions as "The Hairy Who," "The Nonplussed Some," "False Image" and "The Chicago Imagists," the name that gained widest currency.

In 1970, Mr. Brown joined Ms. Kind's gallery, having his first solo show in 1971. After Ms. Kind opened a gallery in New York, he also exhibited there regularly, starting with a solo show in 1975. His work was the subject of a retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington in 1987 and is represented in numerous public collections around the country.

In the 1990's, Mr. Brown's work was widely accepted. He illustrated two covers of Time magazine and translated his style into mosaics for public commissions, including a 54-foot-wide mosaic of Icarus and Daedalus on the front of NBC Tower at 120 North LaSalle Street in Chicago, and a smaller work commemorating the African-American Cemetery at Foley Square in Manhattan.

Last spring the Art Institute school announced that Mr. Brown had given it his homes and studios in Chicago and Michigan, along with his entire collection. The donation also included 30 of his own paintings, some of which the school will sell to establish a scholarship in his name. Tony Jones, president of the school, said that the thousands of objects Mr. Brown owned were still being catalogued, and that the school hoped to establish his Chicago property, a two-story building on the near North Side, as a study collection for scholars of outsider art and popular culture. Mr. Jones confirmed yesterday that Mr. Brown had also bequeathed to the school his California home-studio, designed by the Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman, and all its contents.

Mr. Brown is survived by his parents, Elizabeth and James Brown; and a brother, Greg, of Opelika.

—Roberta Smith

Photos: A detail from "Freedom of Religion," a 1994 painting by Roger Brown (Phyllis Kind Gallery); The painter Roger Brown (Wagenaar, 1983)