Building in a Period Costume, 1978-79
We know that Brown places particular emphasis on the concept of "decorative," even though it is unlikely that these oddly bright, acid-colored works would ever be considered pretty in a bourgeois sense. The issue is one of rhythms, compositional completeness, and substantiality. Beyond this the artist pushes his palette, silhouette figures, architecture, and apocalyptic sky effects. The prototypes for these interests are diverse and representative of our strong American eclecticism: medieval, gothic and Baroque (i.e., nom-Remainers) European art; Oriental, East Indian and Islamic art; American Indian, "outsider," folk, fantasy, surreal, and psychotic art, comics; and ethno-graphic arts. The artist's interplay with these elements, all taken at face value without preconceptions of social or aesthetic class, has freed him to look, observe, and react.

The shadow-puppet figures are an autographic element common to almost all Brown's works. People imply a city, of course, as do lighted windows, cars, trucks, and buildings. There is nothing unisex here. One kind of figure is male and the other is clearly female, the artist admittingly evolving the shapes from memories of his parents in their 1940s hairstyles and distinctive clothing. We can also see that their gestures and placements are prime compositional and narrative elements, leading our eye to areas in the painting, focusing our attention to seeming expressions of anguish, surprise, wonderment, anger, etc. But while the figures are shown conversing, we don't know about what and as voyeurs we intuitively supply our own dialogue. It is an intentional trap set by the artist as he continues to play his theatre of life in Chicago.

Other kinds of works evolve also. He has done paintings which are limited, even risky, in their topical immediacy, such as Fallout at Three Mile Island; Holy Ayatollah, a Persian Minotaur; Jonestown; Museum Without Paintings—A Commemorative of the Opening Show of the MCA. In our madly rushing world these current events are past even before the paint is dry, but Brown finds little need to be conventionally sophisticated because in the folk tradition events are meaningful: the Big Snow; the Big Fire; the Big Freeze; and Washington Crossing the Delaware.

The versatility of Roger Brown's style keeps us all on edge, wondering what's next and how far he can push with these dazzling, haunting paintings.

Jack Cowart
Curator, 19th and 20th Century Art, The St. Louis Art Museum

This exhibition was originally organized by Jack Cowart for the Currents program of contemporary art at the St. Louis Art Museum. We would like to thank Jack Cowart and the lenders to the exhibition for extending this exhibition to Berkeley. Roger Brown is represented by the Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago.
Works in MATRIX:

Just Around the Corner, 1974, oil on canvas. 91.5 x 304.5 cm. Lent by Seymour Surnow and Dennis Kyte, San Francisco.

Storm of Assumption, 1978, oil on canvas. 182.9 x 121.9 cm. Lent by Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, Wilmette, Illinois.

When It Rains It Pours, 1978, oil on canvas. 121.9 x 182.9 cm. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Henry S. Landan, Chicago, Illinois.

Mustangs and Mishap, 1978-79, oil on canvas. 132 x 182.9 cm. Lent by Mrs. and Mrs. Douglas Cohen, Highland Park, Illinois.

Building in a Period Costume, 1978-79, oil on canvas. 182.9 x 121.9 cm. Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Peter W. Broido, West Chicago, Illinois.

Lake Effect, 1980, oil on canvas. 182.9 x 182.9 cm. Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, '71, '73, '74, '76, '77, '79; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, '74; Galerie Dorothea Speyer, Paris '74; Phyllis Kind Gallery, NYC '75, '77, '79; The St. Louis Art Museum, Roger Brown: Currents #6, '80.

Selected group exhibitions:

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Chicago Imagist Art, '72; The Art Institute of Chicago, Seventy-first American Exhibition, '74; XII Bienal de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil, Made in Chicago, '74; School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Former

Famous Alumni, '76; Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Improbable Furniture, '77; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, View of the Decade, '77; The University of Texas at Austin, New in the Seventies, '77; Albright Knox Art Gallery, American Painting of the 1970s, '78; Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Pennsylvania, Intricate Structure/Repeated Image, '79; The Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Some Recent Art from Chicago, '80.

Selected bibliography about Brown:


Cowart, Jack. "Roger Brown: Currents #6," (St. Louis, St. Louis Art Museum '80).

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.