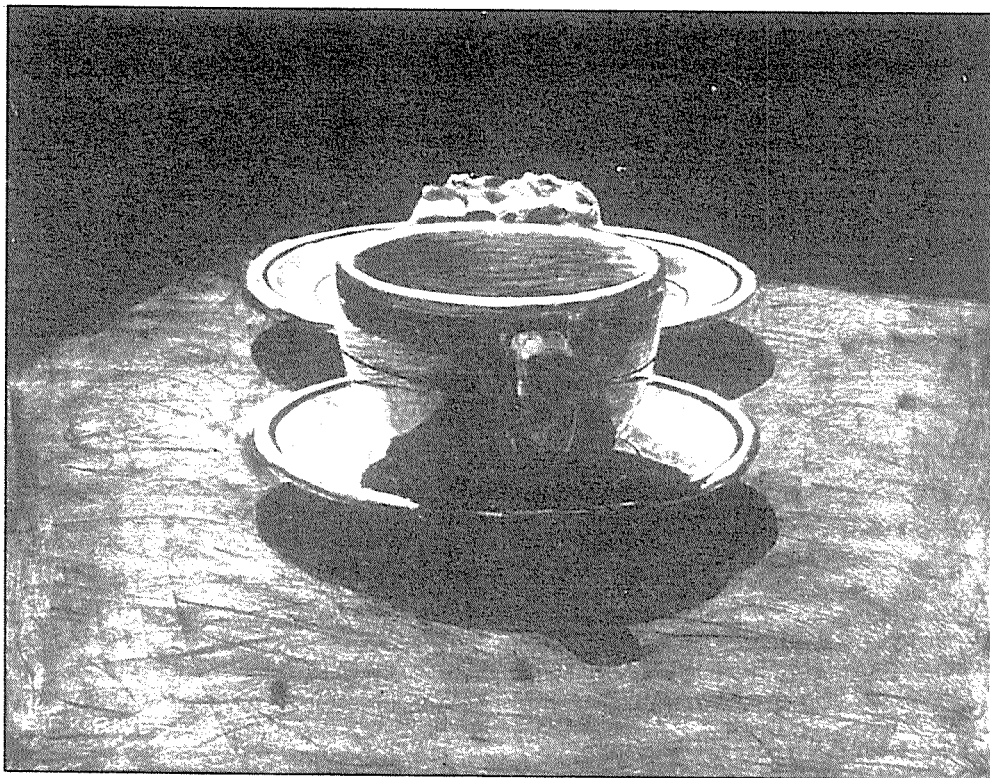


A conversation with Charles Gill

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE



Charles Gill, *Partial Eclipse*, ca. 1986, lithograph, 20" x 26".

In 1947, Charles Gill's widowed mother moved her family from Tennessee to California so that Gill could study art. At fifteen, Gill began taking Saturday classes at the California College of Arts and Crafts, the start of an association with the school that continues to this day. He is now the head of the CCAC printmaking department and the veteran of more than thirty years in the Bay Area art world. Gill has been involved in printmaking in every way, as an artist working with a printer, artist/printer, and master printer.

From 1975 to 1980 he operated Archer Press, editioning prints for Joseph Raffael and Richard McLean, among others. He later invented a multiple drop monotype technique which he has shared with his many students. Throughout his career, he has made paintings as well as prints.

Artweek *When did you first become active as an artist and printmaker in the Bay Area?*

Charles Gill I got into my first museum show, a drawing show at the Oakland Museum in 1950, when I was seventeen. Of course, that made the seventeen-year-old kid feel that he was pretty good. It was years before I got in another show. But at that time, many precocious college students were exhibiting in museum shows. Students were encouraged to enter annuals, juried exhibi-

tions. That's how you established yourself. You got in these shows and exhibited right alongside the big guys.

AW *When did that change?*

CG By the end of the sixties, it became unwieldy, because of the increased population of artists and the greater size and complexity of the works that were being done. It's common in print still. I majored in painting and only studied a little bit of printmaking in college. I was teaching painting and drawing at CCAC when I visited the print shop where George Miyasaki was teaching. I tried a lithograph or two and got lucky—made a couple of good ones. George suggested that I might teach the summer session in printmaking. That's all you need-

ed in those days to qualify for some opportunity like that. I taught a couple of summer sessions. That hooked me back into printmaking.

AW *Since you started working in the fifties, the Bay Area has become a national center for printmaking. What was special about this area—why did it happen here?*

CG I think Crown Point Press was the most important single factor locally. Tamarind, June Wayne's press in Southern California, had an enormous impact on printmaking nationally. Everybody who was into lithography wanted to go there. Even if you didn't have the chance to do that, the dream charged us all up. ULAE, Tatanya Grosman's shop in Long Island, predates Tamarind but we didn't know it. At the time, it was practically a secret, but it came to national attention in that same era. We

were brought along by the national trend as much as by anything that happened locally. But Crown Point's success inspired us right from the start. Richard Diebenkorn's early prints there, the forty-one etchings and dry-

points, and Wayne Thiebaud's book *Delights* are major, major prints.

AW *Of course they're both painters ...*

CG Look around. Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella have made major contributions to the print world. They all use print as a way of pushing their work farther.

AW *So perhaps one of the reasons it happened here is that there were good painters ...*

CG Some good artists who were willing to use print as a major part of their work, yes.

AW *When the de Young Museum mounted the Society of Six show, we rediscovered some of the painters who worked here during the first half of the century. Is there a lineage of Bay Area printmakers that can be traced back to the same period?*

CG I've tried to find a thread that reaches back, but I think that printmaking pretty much grew up in the fifties here. Leon Golden, at CCAC, was teaching Nathan Oliveira how to make prints in '51. Golden is the first printmaking teacher that anyone I know can

remember. He taught Nate who then inspired and taught George Miyasaki and me. Nate remains the still-active local printmaker who did things right back into that era.

AW *Who would you call a 'printmaker's printmaker' in the Bay Area?*

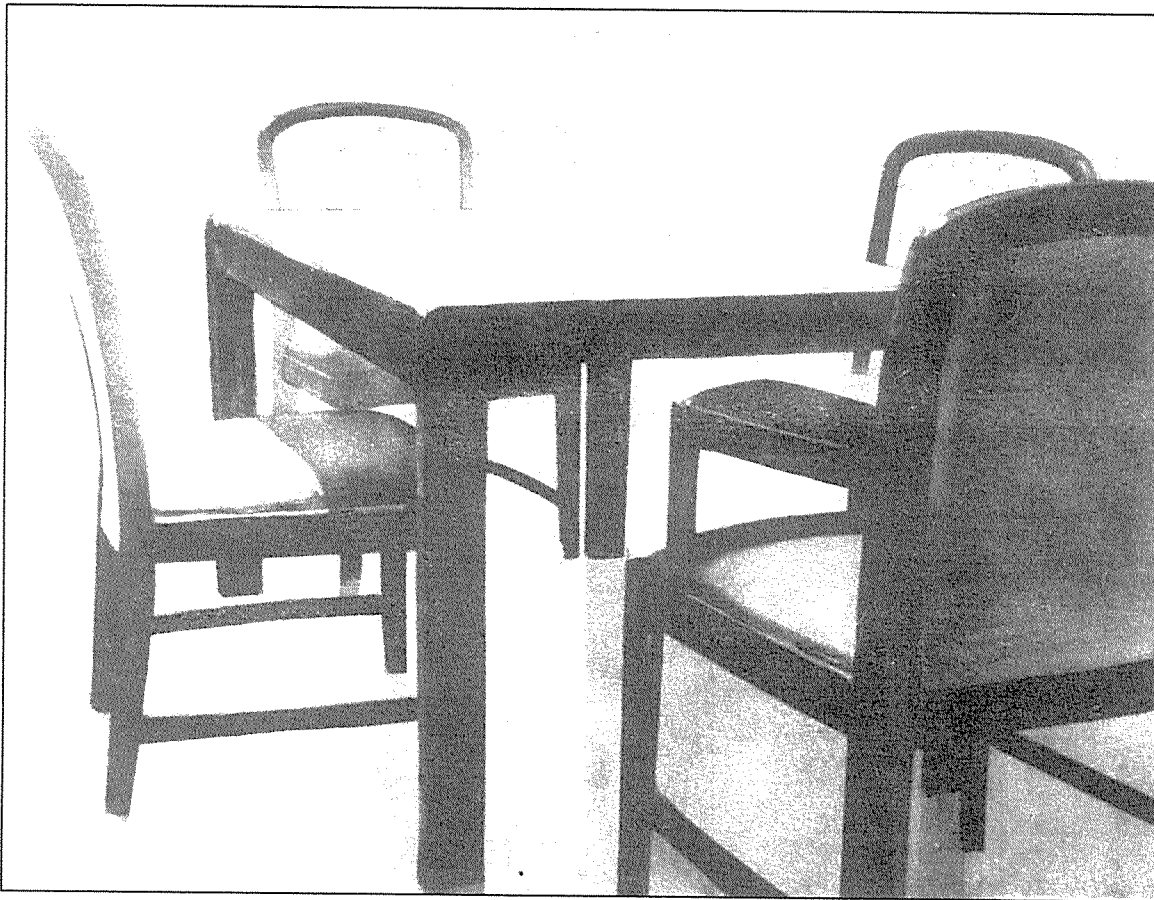
CG Gordon Cook was very influential as a printmaking teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute. Beth Van Hoesen is an important and influential artist. She sets a high standard for the pure printmaker. And again it comes back to Kathan Brown at Crown Point. Whether she's a printmaker or not hardly even matters. She's the brains and the power behind Crown Point Press, which is bigger than a person.

AW *Crown Point has brought many nationally known artists to*

San Francisco to make prints. Does that influence the local print community?

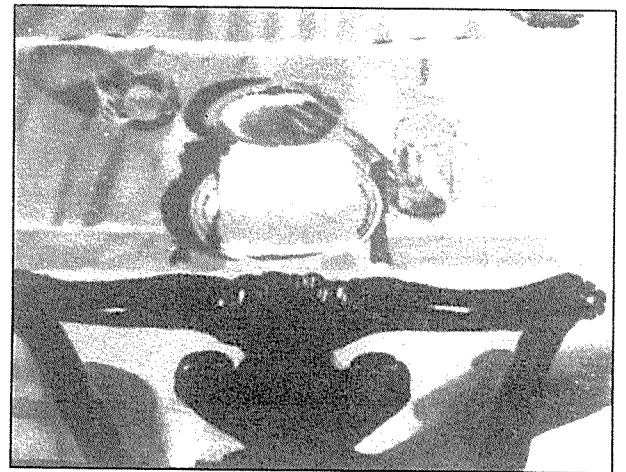
CG It's not so much their presence which is influential, because she protects the privacy of the artists who visit. But that

You can be as tight or as loose as you want. It's like a jazz improvisation—the basic structure is there but you can mess around with it.



Left:
Charles Gill, *Osaka Still Life*, monotype, 19" x 25".

Below:
Charles Gill, *Justice Brandeis' Lunch*, 1984, monotype, 7-1/2" x 9-3/4" image size.



enterprise, going on in our midst, is important, especially now that they have such a fine gallery. I think all of us take a little bit of pride in it. And Crown Point is just the flagship. There are lots of good presses here, Limestone, Trillium, many others. All those things going on and succeeding here—it's like feeling pride in the A's winning the division crown—it punches up our morale.

AW *You invented a technique of monotype which has been adopted by a number of local printmakers.*

CG It's hard to say I invented anything. My method is a little bit unique. Most monotypes are paintings on a metal or Plexiglas plate. When you finish the painting, you lay the paper and print it. I watched friends do monotypes in this mode on an etching press. But I'm a lithographer and I went straight to doing it on a litho press with a Mylar plate.

I laid a sheet of Mylar down simply because it was the thing I had handy that was impervious to the ink and would survive the trip through the press. And I could put a drawing under it to guide where to put the ink. When I was doing photorealistic prints for Richard McLean at Archer Press, I learned how to do really tight registration by researching how they printed fine labels at the turn of the century—cigar labels, things like that. I used the same

trick to register the paper for my monotypes, so I can build up a print in several layers.

The technique allows me to print impulsively, do a little of this, a little of that. The drawing seen through the Mylar tells you where to put everything. You can be as tight or as loose as you want. It's like a jazz improvisation—the basic structure is there but you can mess around with it.

AW *Both Stanford and Mills have cut their printmaking departments in the last couple of years. What are their students missing? A more inclusive phrasing of the question: what's the place of printmaking in an art education?*

CG I don't think there's any great benefit in majoring in printmaking. There's no career out there in it. I just teach it as another way of making art. You have to look at the

whole field of art for examples of how to be an artist and how to understand what's going on out there and the way art relates to everything else.

Print is a small medium. Printmakers tend to complain that print is called a secondary medium. But it just is. It's small. It is limited by its very nature. That doesn't mean it's bad. Painting is different, it has more range. If you're going to make good prints, you'd better know some painting, too. And vice versa. The painters will find that printmaking gives them a very interesting alternative to their habits. Taking a break from the usual routine can push them and their ideas in new directions.

Meredith Tromble is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.

JUNE WAYNE

The remarkable resurgence of printmaking since 1960 is now a matter of art history although that history has yet to be written. One must not mistake the flood of writings about prints as a record on which one can rely. Whether in news stories, or critical reviews, or scholarly-seeming books, the disinformation so typical of our times contaminates art history like radioactive waste.

The goals of Tamarind were radical in the extreme in 1960, but now they are taken for granted and incorporated into the givens of the art milieu. Typically the pendulum has swung too far and prints now are accepted as indiscriminately as once they were rejected as a minor, even expendable form.

There is need for critical and art-historical writers to correct the puerile hype that often passes for fact. An educated public depends upon an educated corps of critics, curators and art historians. But none of these is more important than the quest of the artists themselves, who are changing the nature of printmaking more rapidly than even we appreciate. Unfortunately we are not discussing printmaking among ourselves, or probing why we pursue the form and where we expect to take it. Exactly because printmaking has been diffused throughout the body of art-making, there seems to be no critical mass of conceptual thought going on. Or perhaps I have been too absorbed in my own work to know as much as I should about discourse among my colleagues. Sometime, somewhere, a new beginning is in order.