



CHRISTOPHER BROWN - PHOTOGRAPHS

*Fine prints of the Western American landscape*



RIVERS: THE SONG OF LIFE  
Foothills Art Center, Golden, Colorado  
January 15 - March 12, 2000

Loren Eiseley said: "If there is magic on this planet it is contained in water," and this magic is absolutely magnetic. This exhibit is the response of a dozen photographers to our call for images of rivers. You probably have your own personal notion or image of a river inside your own head. It may be inspired by a poem such as Keswick's *The Cataract of Ladore*, or Twain's *Huck Finn*, or a visual image derived from some piece of art, which has stuck with you. What image comes to mind when you think of rivers? Art and reality interact, and influence each other in elusive ways. We expect representational art to look like reality. What we don't realize is that we also expect reality to look like art! Landscape art such as painting and photography has established standards of what nature looks like. When we look at the landscape we often expect to see something that looks like art!

Chances are your personal image of rivers will be in this show. Hopefully other photographs will be different from that, expanding and stretching your notion of rivers, and thereby enriching you with something new. If you find yourself thinking: "That doesn't look like a river..." you are at the boundary between your notions and the artist's vision. Step across the line and expand your experience! Photography is deceptive. It has been said of photography that it is very difficult precisely because it is so easy. (With modern automatic cameras, with or without film, it is easy to take a photograph that comes out looking good.) "Straight" photography is the art of seeing, and this simple difference is what sets it apart from all other art mediums. We each see the world in our own unique way. To express this personal view of the world requires a commitment to understand one's place in the universe and one's attitude towards it and this is a lifelong pursuit. A photographer is committed to expressing his personal vision in his prints, and it takes a huge investment of time and thought to meet this challenge. Most of the photographers in this show have two things in common: they use large format cameras and they make their own prints,



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both of which enhance the expression of their vision.

As you move through these prints it is easy to look at one, recognize the subject matter, accept it as truth and move on. Looking at photographs is a little like making them: it is difficult precisely because it is so easy. To really see a photograph requires a little effort because it is so easy to dismiss it as being merely documentary. If you ask yourself: Why did the photographer chose this particular subject matter, point of view, composition, and what is he trying to tell us? you may find that the viewing experience becomes richer and more satisfying!

Consider for a moment that straight photography is the art of presenting a vision of what is before and outside of us, and painting is the art of presenting images from inside the artist's head. Photography shares a personal view of the external, physical world, exploring it and teaching us how to see. Painting explores an internal, personal world and shares a view of that world by externalizing it. (However, many photographers work with "resonance" in which an external view resonates with an internal feeling or concept. The external view is a projection of the photographer's inner being. In this sense there is more commonality between painting and photography than one might suppose.) Most importantly, either process can produce art when the result is metaphorical, emotional, symbolic, or aesthetic for the viewer.

The digital revolution is now bridging the traditional territories of photography and painting and is upsetting boundaries. Digital art allows an artist to transmogrify photographic source material to express imaginary concepts. The real and the imaginary, the physical and the mental become intertwined and perhaps indistinguishable. We are witnessing the birth a new art medium, and this is as exciting and unsettling as photography was a hundred years ago. The drama of implausible juxtapositions and the seduction of the shock value of bizarre technical effects will subside as artists learn to harness the potentials of the digital dragon.

This exhibit includes various traditional photographic processes: black and white silver gelatin prints made from black and white negatives; chromogenic (type R-4) and dye destruction (Cibachrome/Ilfochrome) color prints made from color negatives and color transparencies; prints made by enlarger and by the new digital Light Jet printer. The group of



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prints on this wall illustrates several steps in the transition from "straight photography" into photography involving computers. Each piece is annotated with the process for your information.

Christopher Brown, Guest Curator