

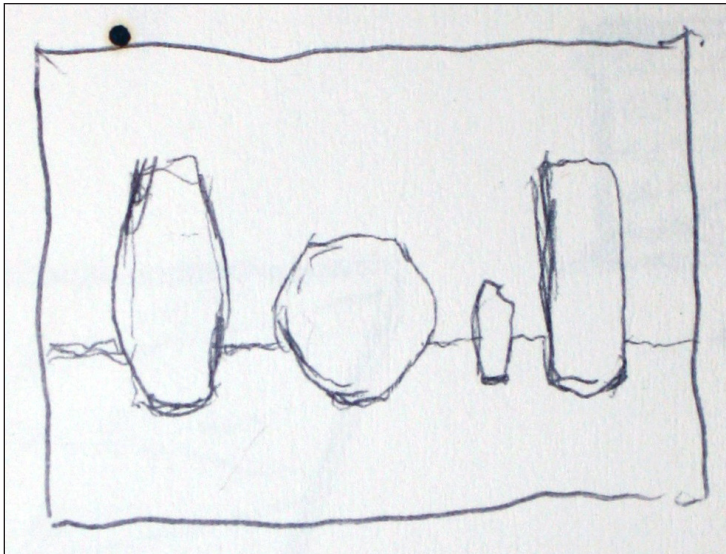
# Roger Brown: Calif. U.S.A.

June 20 - October 3, 2010  
Hyde Park Art Center  
5020 South Cornell Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois



Roger Brown  
Study Collection

Hyde Park **ARTCENTER**



Roger Brown, 1993 to 1997 sketchbook, early sketch laying the groundwork for the *Virtual Still Life* painting objects  
\* all other illustrations also from 1993 - 1997 sketchbook

Cover image:  
Brown's house in La Conchita, CA  
Roger Brown sketchbook, 1990 to 1992

## Roger Brown: Calif U.S.A.: a guide to the exhibition

The displays in this exhibition explore relationships between Roger Brown's art making and the collection he gathered while living in California between 1993 and 1997. Featured in particular are the *Virtual Still Life* object paintings, all made in 1995 and 1996, and the ceramics and furniture he arranged in his home at 6754 Ojai in La Conchita, California. Brown's productivity and fruitful collecting while living here leaves no doubt that the property and the open, Romanesque home and studio designed by the Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman befit his needs. Brown developed this modest lot into a yard teeming with cacti, succulents, several species of bonsai, and many more plants flourishing, at every turn, in and around pots and planters.

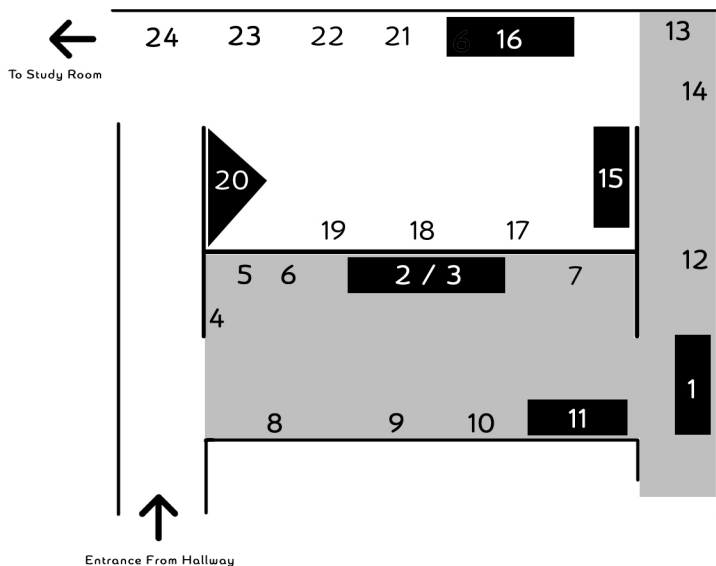
The twenty-seven artworks in the *Virtual Still Life* series, sixteen of which are shown here, confront the human endeavor and the landscape in a distinct form: with a shelf that extends from the bottom edge of each canvas, facilitating the incorporation of a range of collected objects. First applied to this series by critic Dennis Adrian, the term "object paintings" boils down to their essence works that evade simple classification because they are three-dimensional yet, aligning with and hanging on the wall, occupy space in the mode of painting. In many ways, the combination is a synthesis of his collection—in this case, largely ceramic and second-hand—and his art making.

The arrangements of furniture and objects are reassembled here as Brown arranged them in his home. Brown bequeathed his home and collection to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The house was sold and, since 1998, the collection laid in deep storage until February 2009. Over the course of nearly two years, curator Nicholas Lowe and a team of dedicated SAIC students worked with the Roger Brown Study Collection staff to unpack and assess this facet of the Roger Brown Estate.

Many of the objects and much of the furniture in his La Conchita home display a distinctive Mid-century Modern styling and are from the Southwest or Mexico. We can see a lively blend of these traits here in objects that might easily be described as West Coast and Californian.

Significant in this collection is the quality and breadth of the handmade items, in particular the large quantity of one-of-a-kind ceramics, evidently the discarded bounty of pottery classes that Brown picked up in thrift stores and markets. Then there are the unique qualities of particular decorative objects, be they the handmade carvings from Mexico, or the woodcut peacock print made by Brown's brother, Greg Brown, or the painting-by-numbers picture that crowns the 1950s Crosley television. Brown cared deeply for all these things but gave special prominence to those that proudly bear their handmade qualities.

## Floor plan for Part 1:



This first section of the exhibition takes the lead for its organization from the distinctly western and southwestern character that is evident both in the object paintings and in the reassembled arrangements. This room has two axes: one established by the **Television Arrangement** (catalog #1) and another centered on the green hutch and blue shelf.

In many ways, the **Television Arrangement** forms the conceptual axis of the *Virtual Still Life* object paintings while also standing as the physical center of Brown's La Conchita home. Initially this is evidenced in the paint-by-numbers still life painting that is hung on the wall with the delicate ceramic lamp placed just below it on top of the television. This particular placement of items reflects the arrangements that were in the home of Aldo Piacenza, a friend and artistic inspiration to Brown. Piacenza decorated his suburban Chicago home with landscape murals on each of its walls, with intricate ceramics and other objects placed on shelves in front of them. Brown curated an exhibition on the work of Piacenza, well known for his birdhouse constructions based on Italian cathedrals and churches, at Hyde Park Art Center in 1971. In this exhibition, Brown went to great lengths to recreate aspects of the Piacenza home, creating displays of the birdhouses, as they appeared in Piacenza's garden, complete with a trellis, picket fence, and foliage. The backdrop to this reassembled **Television Arrangement** has been faithfully constructed to represent Stanley Tigerman's design of sliding doors in Brown's La Conchita home.

In the center are two arrangements, **Bedroom Left: Green Hutch** (cat. #2) and **Bedroom Right: Blue Shelf** (cat. #3), which Brown situated close to his bedroom, on either side of the bathroom door. The ceramics and fur-

niture included in the green hutch originate almost exclusively from Mexico but were almost certainly acquired by Brown in California. Many of these pots are typical of souvenir pottery made in Mexico from about the 1920s onward. Brown and his dear friend Linda Cathcart visited thrift stores in the Milpas neighborhood, the heart of Santa Barbara's Mexican community. Featured inside this hutch on the top and middle shelves are two types of red-ware decorative pottery from Mexico. Hand-built and slip-decorated with a clear glaze, this is known generally as *Bandera* for its predominance of red, green and white decoration, the Mexican national colors; *bandera* is Spanish for 'flag'. The white slip-decorated pieces are marked 'Tonalá', for their origin in this town in Jalisco. The red clay pieces are from Tlaquepaque. The bottom shelf features examples of Saltillo pottery; these are slip-decorated in cream and then over-glazed in dark green. On top of the hutch are three burnished Peruvian figures, hand-built of red clay.

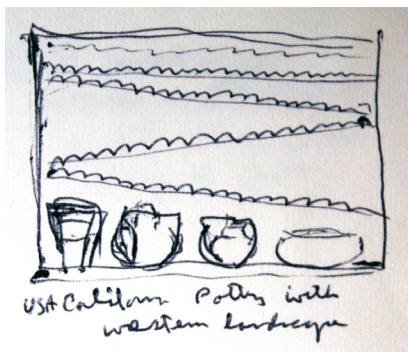
The slip-decorated earthenware items on the blue **Bedroom Right** shelf arrangement are again primarily of Mexican origin. Of significance on the top shelf is the carved wooden 'batea' tray from Guerrero. The tray, carved from a single piece of wood then free-hand painted, most likely dates from the 1940s or 1950s. On the third shelf to the left is a particular type of cream colored, slip-decorated ceramic, with a white yellow and green floral design; this item is made by the studio pottery 'Jimenez' in Mexico. Discussions with Linda Cathcart have revealed that Señor Jimenez makes the pots and his wife paints on the decoration. The bowl on the bottom shelf and the three objects on the floor are all types of drip-ware pottery. These objects were often given as gifts or offered as prizes to be won at carnivals and fairs in Mexico. The bowl in the center of the shelf and the two bowls on the floor are decorated with colored slips and then clear glazed, whereas the pitcher is a single-fired clay that has been painted.

Turning to the *Virtual Still Life* object paintings on either side of these shelf arrangements, there are three works on the left and one on the right. All accentuate southwestern themes with desert landscapes as their foci. From left to right, **Virtual Still Life #10 Nemadji Earth Pottery Framed In Candy Apple Red** (1995, cat. #4) is the smallest piece in the series. The ceramics featured in this piece are called 'Nemadji,' and they are often mistakenly identified as the handicraft products of ancient Native American tribes. Nemadji pottery was in fact mass-produced in Minnesota in the twentieth century for the tourist trade, and the false mythology of native origins is the invention of the manufacturer. The undulating swirls and mopped cast clay body lends to the handmade look. Though this work is the smallest in the series, the clouds are painted in the same scale as those in many of Brown's larger paintings. This scale shift renders the pottery monumental in relation to their setting and the ceramics in this context call to mind the undulating striped rock formations of the Grand Canyon and Death Valley. Brown emphasized his color choices in several of his titles, and here, "Candy Apple Red" is the name of a paint color particularly associated with American classic cars of the 1950s and 1960s.



**Virtual Still Life #17 Cups With Handles And Desert Landscape** (1995, cat. #5) and **Virtual Still Life #18 Cups Without Handles And Desert Landscape** (1995, cat. #6) are presented here as a diptych. In a striking departure from his previous, subtler, and almost natural color palette of browns and blues, these works show bold and bright horizontal stripes, in an equally bright and likewise gradient painted frame. These radiating waves of color, again alluding to natural anomalies, call to mind Arizona's painted desert. The tiny figures, Brown's signature silhouetted couple, sporting the 1940s hairstyles of his parents, are visibly bowled over by the sight of these hand-built and thrown stoneware mugs that take on the scale of monumental rock formations. As one's eyes move across these psychedelic canvases, the figures swap postures, flailing their arms, the human body's most handle-like appendage, as if to say, "Wow!" or "Help!" This gesticulation parallels the two different structures of the cups: "with handles" and "without handles."

A number of the object paintings in the *Virtual Still Life* series are not prefaced with the words "virtual still life" in their title. **Calif. U.S.A. With Astonished Couple** (1995, cat. #7) is one of these. The ceramic objects incorporated into this work bear the mark "Calif. U.S.A." and "Calif". These classic mid-century "California ware" pots represent the height of domestic modernism. Each with a clear designation of place for the respective "Astonished Couple," these first three object paintings suggest a reverent yet touristic encounter with nature. All but one of the mid-century bowls is slip-cast stoneware. These are decorative planters, squat and earthbound; the wide openings of the bowls open up to the gradient of sunburst colors, uncommon in Brown's work in light of their progression through such an intense tonal range.



In several of Brown's previous paintings, cities sprawl, roads cascade forward over hills, and tributaries converge. Here, images of life and water rushing have been given similar form. In this work, **Virtual Still Life #15 Waterfalls And Pitchers** (1995, cat. #8), the water glows as it cascades with unnatural neatness, as if it were placidly poured from the pitchers at their base. The colors, lips, body, and handles of the vessels are much more variegated than the landscape. The descriptions of "lips" and "body" lend a human element to these ceramics, and the small, blue pitcher, bearing the inscription of its maker, "Regina 13," on the base celebrates the humanity of the crafted object.

In the object paintings **Virtual Still Life #2 Large Bowl With Western Landscape** (1995, cat. #9) and **Virtual Still Life #11 Mugs And Moun-**

**tains** (1995, cat. #10), there are interesting parallels to be drawn between the ceramics that are featured in both of the 'outdoor' shelves, only one of which, **Carport Unpainted** (cat. #11), is shown here. The ceramics in these object paintings and those on the Carport Unpainted shelf are largely stoneware items, glazed in earth colors and subdued blue tones. Roger Brown accumulated such a large quantity of pottery in La Conchita that it also filled the carport and garden areas of his home. He also used these areas to display his collection of bonsai, cacti and succulents, and here the ceramic containers frequently served as planters. There were two shelves in the carport area on the west side of the house, **Carport Unpainted** and **Carport Green** (which is currently on view by appointment at the Roger Brown Study Collection). In some ways, the carport area functioned as an open storage facility for many of the ceramics that Brown later installed in the *Virtual Still Life* object paintings.

Moreover the dark brown and black glazed bowl that is presented in **Virtual Still Life #2 Large Bowl With Western Landscape** strikes a very strong resemblance to the cup in the middle of the upper shelf in the **Carport Unpainted** arrangement, and to the mug on the extreme left of **Virtual Still Life #11 Mugs And Mountains**. Might these items be by the same maker? In the juxtaposition of this object painting, second in the series of twenty-seven, with Brown's colorful hutches, the rhythmic repetition of the shelves with their objects is accentuated. The lips of the bowls and plates echo the layers of curved stripes on the canvas. The form also recalls a devotional niche, complementing the religious themes found in a variety of other works by Roger Brown. In each of these object paintings, we see two distinct western landscapes. The large bowl in **Virtual Still Life #2** sits attendant in a landscape evocative of the agricultural expanse of California's central valley, its fertile, tilled fields anticipating planting. Brown arranged the mugs in **Virtual Still Life #11**, on the other hand, in an alliterative line, solid and confident against mountains like those he would have seen on road trips he took to Nevada and Utah.

Brown was greatly inspired by the environments around him, as seen in the choreographing of his grounds at La Conchita. Brown not only collected an enormous variety of plants, but also collected the planters and pots to house them in. His immense compilation of ceramics extended from the hutches inside his home, to the hutch in the carport just outside, to the facades and fences of his outdoor garden. In the process of working with these ceramics, recreating his arrangements, and studying photos of his garden, we could not resist the temptation to re-plant some of the pots and dishes with cacti, succulents, and bonsai, as closely as possible to the way Brown planted them, and place them in the gallery windows (cat. #12 and #29). Aided by the ideal growing conditions of Southern California, the garden at 6754 Ojai quickly grew to maturity. Brown's strongest urges were to create combinations of homes, collections, and gardens with a studio at the heart.

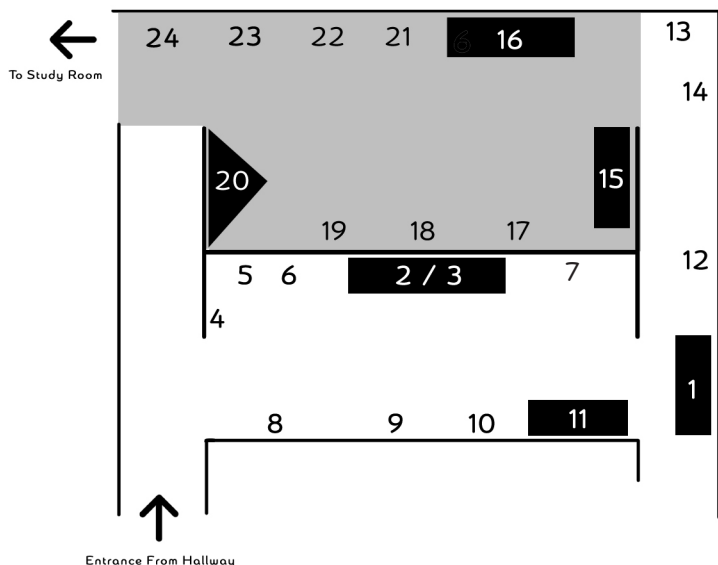
The plants on the **Gallery South: Windowsill** (cat. #12) have been selected based upon research of the succulent plants and cacti in Brown's garden.

The Calif. U.S.A. Atomic Ware planter on the left has a lime-green, wax-resist glaze. This pot holds *Dudleya Gnoma*, *Echeveria*, *Stenocereus Marginatus* and Barrel Cactus. To the right are two more cacti. The first is in a medium, hand-built and turned, stoneware pot with black feathering in the glaze, which recalls the swirls of the pottery in ***Virtual Still Life #10 Nemadji Earth Pottery Framed In Candy Apple Red***. The second cactus is in a terra cotta, thrown pot made in Mexico. Planted in the large, flared, tiered turquoise pot—another example of Calif. U.S.A. ware—is a Prickly Pear Cactus.

Home for Brown was a place where he could really explore; the collections provided an opportunity for different kinds of travel, in the worlds that the objects themselves represented and in the landscapes that he created in his paintings. The enigmatic qualities of ***A Painting For A Sofa: A Sofa For A Painting*** (1995, cat. #13) point to a metaphysical departure into the picture plane. This object painting is a play on the clichéd practice of picking art to match one's furniture, and vice versa. We don't know if Brown made or bought the miniature sofa that is included in this object painting, but in light of how he assembled the other works in the series, and due to its dimensions, we reason it could be a handmade, one-off piece made for a doll's play-house purchased, perhaps, in a thrift store and matched to the painting. It might have reminded him of the skies he so often painted throughout his career. By matching object and painting, Brown emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between making art for gallery display and making objects for utility. The shifting of scale in this object painting is disconcerting. Now an object that is miniature in comparison with its life-sized cousin is made life-sized by being inserted into the expansive landscape in this painting. The narrative here has everything to do with the art of cultivating an environment in which to live. This painting takes this symbiosis to the extreme: the painting is a landscape as well as a wall to match the sofa. Shown here in direct relationship to ***Virtual Still Life #19 Third Dynasty With A View*** (1995, cat. #14), the mood takes a sudden change. The tall ceramics, standing against the intensely horizontal landscape like buildings in a skyline, again display Brown's range in collecting everything from one-of-a-kind handmade to manufactured, mass-produced objects. Because of the shape of the smooth, possibly porcelain, slip-cast vase, the exhibition team considered the term "Dynasty," in the title, in terms of Chinese history. His sketches for this work are the most varied, showing a variety of ceramic combinations but failing to explain the mystery of this last object painting included in this section of the exhibition.



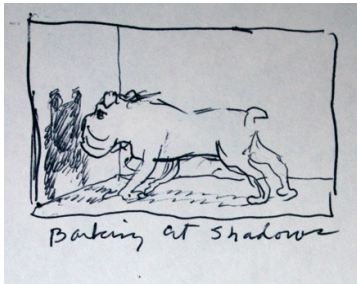
## Floor Plan for Part 2:



The arrangement of objects and the object paintings in this section of the exhibition wrestle with a series of related contradictions. There are “sacred” and “profane” objects of devotion. There are images of plenty and of poverty. **Studio Right: Blue Hutch** (cat. #15), another distinctive ordering of domestic space, plays on a series of edges. The masks and shelf with its venerated chocolate cup, from Tlaquepaque, Mexico (circa 1950s–’70s), form an altar-like structure. Moving downward, the narrative of the arrangement develops through associations of domestic consumption towards the floor and the hand-built, burnished and scorched, red earth of the cooking pots below. Much of the dinnerware found in this Mexican hutch is Russel Wright, ‘American Modern’ dinnerware. These items are slip-cast in domestic stoneware, hand-formed and finished with a coral glaze. Wright was a twentieth century American designer whose mass-produced styles brought modern designed objects to the general public in the United States. Brown mixed these well-known mid-century modern pieces with more traditional, decorative Mexican ceramic items, carnival masks, African masks and other decorative and functional handmade trinkets. It is possible that the unique cactus coat stand next to the hutch was one of Brown’s first purchases in California. Brown’s early photographs of the house show the coat stand in the entryway with very little else around it. This thrift store cactus stand would have been just too good to pass up in consideration of the cactus and succulent garden growing just outside the door in Brown’s own backyard.

Possibly one of the most personal, intimate and even private reconstructions in this exhibition is the **Dog Table** (cat. #16) arrangement. In the

house at La Conchita, this was situated to the right of the bed and opposite the bathroom door. In many ways this collection of objects holds particular testament to Brown's quotidian activities of paying bills, writing letters to friends, and making phone calls to his dealer, Phyllis Kind. In fact, the post-cards found on the desk promote his exhibition of *Virtual Still Life* object paintings at Phyllis Kind gallery in 1996. Brown left much loose change, which he would have nonchalantly emptied from his pockets at the end of the day, on the Dog Table. An attestation to his daily goings-on, the team working on the exhibition carefully archived each coin. Even more intimately attached, however, are the dogs included among the items in this arrangement.



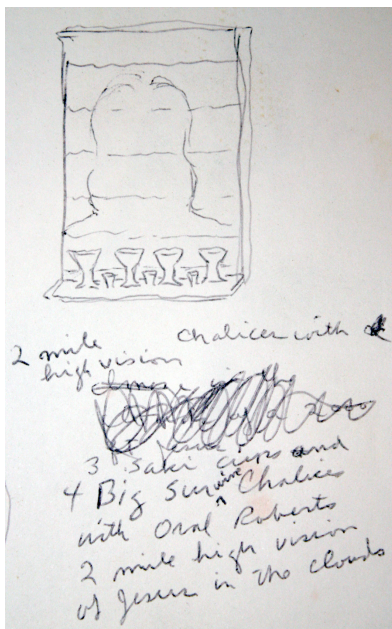
Roger Brown owned three dogs in his adult life: a brindle coated boxer called Duchess, an English bulldog called Babe Ruth O'Crosswinds (Sexpot), and a white English bulldog, with one brown ear, called Elvis White Dove. All were integral to his home life. On a long, solo road trip throughout the Southwest in 1975, Brown picked up Babe, his second bulldog, in Arizona. Elvis, the third and last dog Brown owned, was named after the singer who also happened to be a distant cousin of the artist.

Placed opposite the blue hutch, the object painting ***Virtual Still Life #7 Flexible Blue Madonna With Orange Salt And Pepper Shakers*** (1995, cat. #17) reflects a similar set of domestic concerns. The same rich orange and blue tones are found also in each and the orange salt and pepper shakers are consistent with the mid-century modern style popularized by of the Russel Wright studio. "Brown delightedly explained that he found both the flexible Madonna and the salt and pepper shakers 'at exactly the same moment' in a thrift store and felt they belonged together in this piece," said Margaret Hawkins of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, reviewing a show at Phyllis Kind gallery in 1996. The frame for this work, the only unpainted wood frame in the series, is chip-carved like the "Tramp Art" that Brown admired.

In ***Virtual Still Life #16 Sake Cups And Four Big Sur Communion Chalice*** (1995, cat. #18), the overlapping shadows of the seven (a number latent with Christian symbolism) stoneware objects, the beige color of which matches the bottom of the frame, loom over the tiny shrubbery at the base of the canvas yet are in proportion to the "two mile high" Christ figure. The multiple references to ritual reflect Brown's serious and humorous, reverent and critical treatment of religion in his works. Brown's connection to religion lead him to consider becoming a preacher before deciding instead to pursue art as a career, and to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Oral Roberts was a Pentecostal televangelist who founded the multimillion-dollar ministry and Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A famous photograph of Roberts shows a sign on his desk that reads: "Make

no little plans here." Even his dreams were on grand scale, and in 1977 he reportedly had a vision of a 900-foot-tall Jesus. Here the colossal Christ looks like he could snatch that airplane out of the sky, King-Kong-style.

In the title of this next object painting, **Virtual Still Life #5 Elegant Pot With Gold Sky** (1995, cat. #19), the descriptive tone is also instructive. It's unclear if Brown is telling us that this is an elegant pot, or if the pot is inherently in possession of elegance. Like **A Painting For A Sofa: A Sofa For A Painting**, this object painting, numbered early in the series, asks us to question the conventions of decoration and the meaning of elegance. The shelf becomes the only indication of a landscape and is intentionally uncluttered, save the elegant pot. We see only the sky, complementing the soft



tones of the pot, which itself becomes part of the landscape. The same soft wood and gold tones are present too in the Haywood Wakefield table at the center of the next arrangement, **Jesus Table** (cat. #20). This Jesus and peacock-themed tableau holds an especially personal significance in the La Conchita collection. Brown's brother, Greg, made the peacock print included in the arrangement, which along with the peacock paisley printed skirt anchors the color range for this reassembled arrangement. Brown himself was also the owner of two peacocks, which he kept as pets in his La Conchita garden. The placement of this arrangement within the La Conchita home further extends the peacock theme as the bejeweled birds kept outside could be seen from where this tableau stood in the house, to the left of the door in the southeast corner. The large cross and Jesus-themed collectables included in the arrangement reflect Brown's upbringing in the Church of Christ and his earlier desire to become a minister prior to beginning his career as an artist. This religious theme was never fully abandoned and can be followed throughout many of Brown's paintings and *Virtual Still Life* compositions. Keeping this arrangement in balance and subtly giving evidence of Brown's witty, ever-present humor, however, is the artist's inclusion of the 1994 R. Crumb "Devil Girl Chocho-Bar" collectable, its wrapper flaunting the slogan "It's BAD For You."

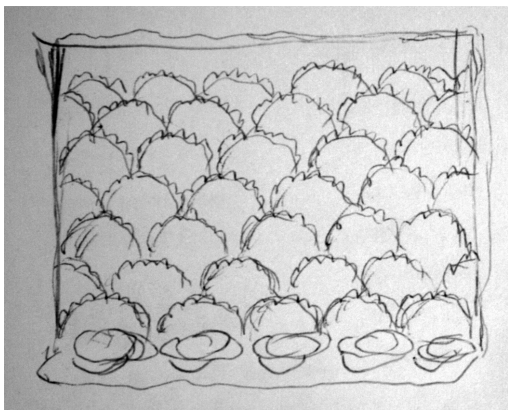
The whole *Virtual Still Life* object painting series is arguably an exploration of landscapes in the United States and the experiences inscribed in them. Roger Brown was continually interested in the stories and experiences that have built the nation and, in the object paintings **Candy Dish With Lush Landscape** (1996, cat. #21) and **Virtual Still Life #26 Bread Bas-**

**ket With Dust Bowl** (1996, cat. #22), explores this narrative. Again exploring contradiction, again echoing the color range of blues and browns in this part of the display, when reflecting back from these two object paintings upon the *Virtual Still Life* series as a whole, a particular narrative of poverty and luxury is laid wrenchingly open. The little gold legs of this candy dish prop up a particularly opulent example of a mid century design, popularly used for entertaining in North American corporate spaces and living rooms in the 1950s and 1960s. Here in contradistinction with the more subdued and plain candy dish that is inset into the lamp at the center of the *Jesus Table* arrangement a similar narrative play is evident.

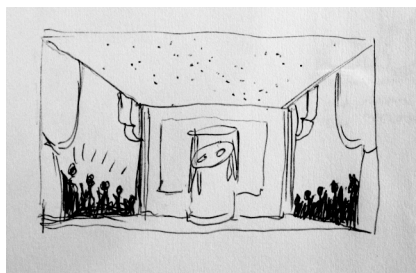
We have no way of knowing in what order Brown made these object paintings, though these two are organized numerically in the series as the last. Even so, **Virtual Still Life #25** is displayed here as if it is part of a pair with **Virtual Still Life #26 Bread Basket With Dust Bowl**. The objects of each and the suggested socio-geographical landscape history stand in stark opposition to each other. The barren “Dust Bowl” and inedible “Bread Basket” contrast the lush, green landscape and “Candy Dish” representing a fertile land and prosperity. The devastation of the 1930s dust bowl and the economic depression it coincided with is but one of a catalog of corporate and environmental disasters that have caused human tragedy in the United States. In a recent close examination of this object painting the curatorial team made an important discovery. Four male farmer figures, each wearing a ball cap and holding a pitchfork, are painted beneath the white dust in the landscape. The homesteads, other figures, and trees have all been swept away, perhaps to California, as was the case with many farmers after the dust bowl, leaving only an empty bread basket, made of slip-cast porcelain with a sprayed gradient glaze reminiscent of Brown’s scalloped skies. The seriousness and passion with which Brown worked would indicate that these four figures were not painted out, but that they are deliberately hidden, just visible as the dust blows through.

In many of these object paintings, Brown is reflecting upon other paintings and object pieces he had previously made throughout his career. The scalloped landscape in the **Candy Dish** and **Bread Basket** object paintings is consistent with a landscape motif that Brown utilized in a number of other artworks. Significantly, the landscape in **Virtual Still Life #13 Hills And Bowls At The Last Millennium** (1995, cat. #23) has the same rhythmic qualities as the landscape of faces in Brown’s 1994 untitled mural commission (which has been referred to as *Twentieth Century Plague: the victims of AIDS*). Installed in a lobby of the Foley Square Federal Center at 290 Broadway in New York City, this is one of the works of art commissioned to commemorate an African slave burial ground that was discovered while building excavations were underway on the site. The five bowls in **Virtual Still life #13** are aligned perfectly with five hillocks at the foot of the landscape. Following on from the devastation in the **Virtual Still Life #26 Bread Basket And Dust Bowl**, the image here is of begging bowls requesting food or alms for the poor.

The range of ceramics in *Virtual Still Life #13 Hills And Bowls At The Last Millennium*, both in their material and in their method of production, also makes reference to a range of social positions. From the self-consciously restrained and artistic, Asian influenced bowl on the extreme left, to the mass-produced 'Calif' ware bowl next to it, with the hand-built, crudely cut, art-class pot in the



center, to the hand-built terracotta Mexican souvenir bowl on the right, these objects vary in market value and social status but are all humble in their aspirations. Brown gives them all the same space, elevation, and dignity. If we read the center as a place of importance, then the chip on the rear edge of the art class pot holds precedence. While the words "last millennium" of the title denote a time period, the eerily, theatrically under-lit hills and Brown's upbringing in the fundamental religious environment of the Church of Christ are kindling for an apocalyptic interpretation that is anticipated in his image of AIDS as the *Twentieth Century Plague*, and of slavery as a genocide of the previous century.



The last object painting in the exhibition is called *Vase Noir* (January 1996, cat. #24). All eyes are on the manufactured, masquerading ceramic centered here. While other paintings in the series include only a few tiny figures, here a full-fledged crowd surrounds the ceramic. There are eighteen figures in all, twelve seated above the stage and six standing below, who give the

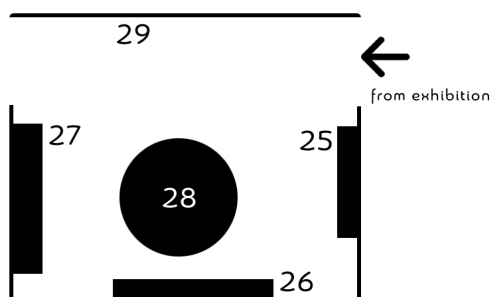
impression that they might be waiting in the wings for their entrance. The image of the mask is shell-like and fragile, which is emphasized by the thin slip-cast form. How much Brown intended this to be an image of himself in the center, surrounded by his family and perhaps his friends, is open to conjecture, though he invited viewers to bring their own interpretations.

This form and the visual qualities of this work refer back to a series of theatre interiors that Brown began painting while still a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He acknowledged that these interiors, his first mature paintings, stem from his childhood memories of going to the movies. The frames of many of these early works are thick with rounded edges exaggerating the depth into a one-point perspective recession in space. Brown said he started the theatre paintings in 1968



after his painting teacher, Ray Yoshida, encouraged him to use personal experiences as a resource for his paintings. In 1991, Brown wrote, "Who is Roger Brown? ... I'm the boy who used to see the double features at the Martin Theatre on Saturday morning and then with a quarter from my Uncle Horrice go see the double feature at the Ritz in the afternoon. Now I'm the boy who tries to continue to pursue those adventures in my art."

## The Exhibition Study Area



Roger Brown left us an extensive archive of materials that include a large proportion of his personal effects. From the most pragmatic detail in the form of receipts and check stubs to personal photographs, notes, sketches, and an extensive slide archive of Brown's complete oeuvre, all these items are held at the Roger Brown Study Collection in the archive. In Gallery 4 at Hyde Park Art Center, we have designated the small space at the North East side corner of as the Study Area. The intention here is to provide an opportunity where some of these archive materials can be made available.

The installation of three of the reconstructed shelf arrangements includes, from left to right, the **Living Room Right: Green Hutch** (cat. #25), the **Studio Left: Unpainted Shelf, With Big Yellow Hands** (cat. #26), and the **Den: Cube Shelves** (cat. #27), that have been built to specification, a complete reconstruction as they were designed by Stanley Tigerman and still exist at 6754 Ojai. In the center of the room is an Eero Saarinen table and two chairs (cat. #28) positioned as Brown had them, before and to the left of the studio area in his La Conchita home. On the table is a scale model of the La Conchita house, which Brown often referred to as a "Temple of Painting," made by SAIC Architecture graduate student Rebekah Ison, to the specifications outlined in Tigerman's architectural plans in the RBSC archive.

As previously mentioned, Brown had a vast array of unique decorative plants throughout his outdoor space. On the **Gallery Study Area: Windowsill** (cat. #29) in the exhibition study area sit, left to right: a young Cascading Blue Spruce in a green, footed planter; a Euphorbia in a glazed, salmon-color dish with decorative cement base; a decorative stoneware mug planted with a near identical dwarf Jade tree as Roger once had in it; a young Informal Upright Juniper Bonsai in a square, tex-



tured planter lined with pink glaze; and finally, in the olive-green stoneware planter, a sandstone rock with a Blue Spruce Bonsai and moss. It is apparent that plants played an important role in Brown's life, as he produced five paintings representing each of the specific styles of Bonsai; Informal Upright, Cascade, Ishitsuki, Sekijoju and Literati. Several of these styles, along with Dwarf Eureka Lemon and Fig trees, could be found in Brown's garden collection. Reminiscent of plant textures and the California sky, the abstract backdrops in Brown's *Virtual Still Life* object paintings were inspired by his natural surroundings at La Conchita. Please see the booklet *GARDEN: Roger Brown's La Conchita, CA Garden*, in the Study Area, for images and information on Brown's outdoor sanctuary.

Also in the study area will be a scale model set of all of the *Virtual Still Life* object paintings made by Nicholas Lowe and James Connolly as well as a series of scale models, based on the reassembled arrangements, made by Lowe. All these models are made from cardboard, wood and Sculpey clay. The displays in the **Living Room Right: Green Hutch** and the **Studio Left: Unpainted Shelf, With Big Yellow Hands**, are installations set for the duration of the exhibition. The **Den : Cube Shelves**, on the other hand, will feature a series of changing displays to be curated by members of the public, with assistance from Lowe, using the many and various ceramic objects from La Conchita not featured in the main exhibition displays.

Dana Boutin – Editor and Researcher, *Roger Brown: Calif. U.S.A.*

Laura Caroline Johnson – Registrar, *Roger Brown: Calif. U.S.A.*

Nicholas Lowe – Curator, *Roger Brown: Calif. U.S.A.*

Lisa Stone – Curator, Roger Brown Study Collection.

June 2010

## Roger Brown: "Just the Facts" Timeline

Extensive information and a full biography can be found on the Roger Brown Study Collection website, [www.saic.edu/rogerbrown](http://www.saic.edu/rogerbrown). Brief facts of his life that are especially relevant to this project include:

- Born in 1941, raised in Alabama. Develops proclivity for collecting early on.
- Attends the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, BFA 1968, MFA 1970. Strong encouragement by SAIC teachers/mentors to find and acquire objects of interest and inspiration that function as source materials and to live with them intimately.
- Develops firm conviction that art originating from beyond the mainstream is as, if not more, important than art from within it. Rejects "high/low" dichotomy in lieu of an open approach to images and things.
- 1974, purchases 1926 N. Halsted St. with his partner, architect George Veronda. They rehab the building into a home and studio. The home, on the 2nd floor and in two stairways, is designed specifically to accommodate Brown's ever-growing collection of art/objects.
- 1979, two steel and glass Modernist home and studio pavilions designed by Veronda, nestled in a swath of native plants in New Buffalo, MI, are completed. The home gradually fills with a collection of art/objects, reflecting Brown's evolving interests, and things he finds in the region.
- 1984, George Veronda dies of lung cancer. Brown continues to live and work in his Chicago and New Buffalo home/studios. Eventually tires of Midwest winters and searches for property in a warmer climate for a winter studio.
- After considering property on Florida's west coast and in Albuquerque, Brown purchases 6754 Ojai in La Conchita, CA in 1988, immediately upon seeing the 1955 "Royal Mansion" Spartan trailer residing there.
- Requiring a studio space beyond the Spartan's intimate confines, Brown commissions Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman to design his La Conchita home/studio. After much wrangling with the Ventura County Planning Commission, which mysteriously opposes several of Tigerman's design features, the home, garage, and carport are completed in 1993.
- Brown's La Conchita home gradually fills with an extensive collection of objects reflecting a mid twentieth century Southern California aesthetic, with a preponderance of vernacular ceramic objects. Brown frequents thrift stores in Santa Barbara and environs with good friend and curator Linda Cathcart, who shares his passion for handmade wares from Mexican and California potteries, and abandoned amateur pots of all types, and sundry other things.
- 1995, Brown gives the New Buffalo home, studio, collection, and garden to SAIC, to be used as a retreat for faculty and staff. As a result of this gift, an ongoing stream of artists have enjoyed residencies in this special environment.

- December 1996, Brown gives his collection at 1926 N. Halsted St. to SAIC to be used as a study collection, archive, and laboratory for the SAIC community. The Roger Brown Study Collection has been preserved as he left it, and functions, as he intended, as his “Artists’ Museum of Chicago.” As a result of this gift, an ongoing stream of SAIC students, faculty, staff, and the public have experienced this special environment.
- Aware of his mortality, Brown prepared his last gift to SAIC, prior to his death on 22 November 1997. He bequeathed his home/studio/garden/collection/Spartan in La Conchita to SAIC, and also transferred the representation of his works to the School.
- February - March 1996, September - October 1997 exhibitions of *Virtual Still Life* object paintings at Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago.
- August – September 2004 Roger Brown: *A Different Dimension*, organized by the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, at the Chicago Cultural Center, including twelve *Virtual Still Life* object paintings.
- June 2006 Roger Brown The Last Paintings at Russell Bowman Art Advisory, Chicago, IL, including *Virtual Still Life #2 Large Bowl With Western Landscape* and *Virtual Still Life #12 Modernistic Planter With 1/2 A Desert Painting*.
- After conversing with Roger Brown Study Collection curator Lisa Stone and subsequently conceiving of the *Roger Brown: Calif. U.S.A.* exhibition, Nicholas Lowe and the team he assembled bring the La Conchita collection out from deep storage in February 2009.
- *Roger Brown: Calif. U.S.A.* opens June 20th, to run until October 3, 2010.

# Exhibit Makers

## **Nicholas Lowe: Initial idea, project curator, creator of scale models**

### **Curatorial Practice Class Team**

All worked tirelessly and took the lead on many specific aspects of the exhibition:

Justin Bergquist – installation

Dana Boutin – writing, editing, catalogue design, object documentation

Tricia Cox – installation

Max Davidowitz – 3-D photography, Calif. U.S.A. Market

Laura-Caroline Johnson – chief registrar, object documentation and organization

Alison Kleiman – design of gallery guide & marketing materials

Melissa Lytle – installation, plantswoman

Amanda McCaskey – object documentation and organization, 3-d photography

Becky Scheer – chief animator, 3-d photography

Rebecca Parker – registrar

Lindsey Tornetto – registrar, object documentation

Rebekah Ison – Architectural scale model of Roger Brown's La Conchita,

"Temple of Painting"

Irene Pagliaccia – curatorial assistant

Katlyn Hemmingsen – curatorial assistant

Soon Joo Lee – curatorial assistant

Ana Clara Silva – curatorial assistant

### **Roger Brown Study Collection staff**

Lisa Stone – curator

James Connolly – assistant curator

Leland Meiners – volunteer, collection & transport

Tim Fox – conservator

### **Student staff, 2009-2010:**

Claudia Arzeno, Lucka Matějková, Edelweiss Cardenas, Tianyi Jiang,

Dana Boutin, Danny Giles, Millicent Kennedy, Carol Adams, Melissa Lytle

### **Art Institute of Chicago staff**

Billy Brown, Patrick Jones, Jermaine Smith

### **SAIC faculty and staff**

Christine Atha – catalog contributor

Lisa Wainwright, Paul Coffey, Kitty Ross, Joan Livingstone, Shanna Linn,

Elysia Borowy-Reeder, Rae Ulrich, Cheryl Jessogne, Sarah Jane Mallin,

Tyrell Cannon, Craig Downs, Sherry Medina, Molly Roth, Anne Nepokro-

eff, Michael Milano

Thanks to the office of the President at SAIC and to the Deans and Division chairs for their support through a faculty Enrichment Grant in 2009.

**Hyde Park Art Center staff**

Allison Peters Quinn, Director of Exhibitions

Chris Hammes, Preparator

Kate Lorenz, Executive Director

Crystal C. Pernell, Marketing and Communications Manager

Michelle Beckett, School and Studio Manager

Ray Yang, Program Director

**Lenders**

Joe and Wendy Davis

Susan and Thomas Ela

Ruth Horwich

Lael and Eugenie Johnson

Private collection

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

**Friends and supporters**

Greg Brown and the extended Brown family, Russell Bowman, Matt Bergstrom, Linda Cathcart, and Claudia McLaughlin at Casa Dolores in Santa Barbara, Center for the Study of Popular Arts Of Mexico, Ron Gordon, Bill Harbison, Ruth Horwich, Don Howlett, Eva Hausam, Alexis Hyman, Julie Joyce, Santa Barbara Museum, Bonnie and Bill Kelm, Ben Lim, Michael Maurello, Daniel Paul, Maryanne Redding, Sara Velas, Melissa Weber, David Wilson, Jana Wright, Jim Zanzi.

**Roger Brown Study Collection Steering Committee**

Phil Hanson, Richard Hull, Nicholas Lowe, Vince Michael, Gladys Nils-son, Jim Nutt, Barbara Rossi, Michael Ryan, Jim Zanzi (and from 1997 to 2008, Ray Yoshida).

## Roger Brown: Calif. U.S.A. Exhibition Checklist

- 1 *Television Arrangement* – Crosley television with six objects
- 2 *Bedroom Left: Green Hutch* – hutch with 16 objects
- 3 *Bedroom Right: Blue Hutch* – hutch with 22 objects
- 4 *Virtual Still Life #10 Nemadji Earth Pottery Framed In Candy Apple Red*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 9 in.  
Collection of Ruth Horwich
- 5 *Virtual Still Life #17 Cups With Handles And Desert Landscape*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 25 x 25 1/2 x 9 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection
- 6 *Virtual Still Life #18 Cups Without Handles And Desert Landscape*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 25 x 25 1/2 x 9 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection
- 7 *Calif. U.S.A. With Astonished Couple*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 48 x 60 x 12 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection
- 8 *Virtual Still Life #15 Waterfalls And Pitchers*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 37 1/2 x 50 x 9 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection
- 9 *Virtual Still Life #11 Mugs And Mountains*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 26 x 37 1/2 x 9 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection
- 10 *Virtual Still Life #2 Large Bowl With Western Landscape*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 25 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 14 in.  
Private collection
- 11 *Carport Unpainted* – shelf with 29 objects
- 12 *Gallery South Windowsill* – 4 pots and 9 plants
- 13 *A Painting For A Sofa: A Sofa For A Painting*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 25 1/2 x 31 x 9 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection
- 14 *Virtual Still Life #19 Third Dynasty With A View*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 37 1/2 x 37 1/2 x 9 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection



- 15 *Studio Right: Blue Hutch* – hutch with 79 objects
- 16 *Dog Table* – desk, chair, 19 objects and \$102.73 in change
- 17 *Virtual Still Life #7 Flexible Blue Madonna With Orange Salt And Pepper Shakers*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 17 x 12 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.  
Collection of Lael and Eugenie Johnson
- 18 *Virtual Still Life #16 Sake Cups And Four Big Sur Communion Chalices With Oral Roberts' Vision Of A Two Mile High Jesus*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 29 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 9 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection
- 19 *Virtual Still Life #5 Elegant Pot With Gold Sky*, 1995  
Oil on canvas, wood, mixed media, 26 x 31 x 8 1/2 in.  
Collection of Lael and Eugenie Johnson
- 20 *Jesus Table* – table and 28 objects
- 21 *Candy Dish With Lush Landscape*, 1996  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 25 1/2 x 31 1/2 x 9 in.  
Collection of Susan and Thomas Ela
- 22 *Virtual Still Life #26 Bread Basket With Dust Bowl*, 1996  
Oil on canvas, mixed media, 25 1/2 x 31 x 9 in.  
SAIC/Roger Brown Estate Painting Collection
- 23 *Virtual Still Life #13 Hills And Bowls At The Last Millennium*, 1995  
Oil in canvas, wood, ceramic, 49 1/2 x 61 x 11 1/2 in.  
SAIC Roger Brown Permanent Collection
- 24 *Vase Noir*, 1996  
Oil on canvas, wood, mixed media, 16 x 33 x 7 1/2 in.  
Collection of Joe and Wendy Davis
- 25 *Living Room Right Green Hutch* – hutch and 13 objects
- 26 *Studio Left Unpainted Shelf, With Big Yellow Hands* – shelves with 71 objects
- 27 *Den: Cube Shelves* – Shelves built to replicate Stanley Tigerman's in the La Conchita house and 34 objects
- 28 Eero Saarinen table and chairs from the studio left area of the La Conchita home. House Model by Rebekah Ison
- 29 *Gallery Study Area: Windowsill* – 5 planters and 5 plants

## Exhibition Events

**The Calif. U.S.A. Market** is a curated retail space of Souvenirs, Merchandise, and artwork. The market is inspired by Roger Brown's collection, his appreciation and understanding of the intrinsic value of the object. The market will be open: June 20, 24, 27; July 8, 21; August 29; October 3. For more information: [www.califusamarket.com](http://www.califusamarket.com)

### **Lectures with Christine Atha,**

curator of *The People's Gallery of Everyday Objects*

Thursday, June 24, 6 pm:

Retrieving our Selves: Thrift Store Culture and Collecting

Thursday, July 15, 6 pm:

Objects on the Couch: The Meaning in Everyday Things

### **In conjunction with *The People's Gallery of Everyday Objects*:**

**Open Call for Public Objects:** Please bring your objects to Christine Atha to be included in the "Gallery." Christine will talk one-on-one with the collector to determine the object label to accompany the object in the hallway gallery space. Sunday, June 27 and Sunday, July 11 from 2-4 pm.

**Curator for a Day:** Artist and curator of *Calif. U.S.A.*, Nicholas Lowe invites members of the public to be guest curator for the day.

Participants will be invited to choose and arrange objects from a stock of items in Roger Brown's La Conchita collection.

The conversation that transpires during the process of selection will be conducted in the gallery: Wednesdays July 14, July 21, and July 28, from 2-6 pm each day.

**Talk with the Curator:** Nicholas Lowe, Sunday October 3, at 3 pm.

Join the curator of *Roger Brown: Calif. U.S.A.* as he explains the process of working with a unique Chicago collection. What were some of the challenges in attempting to translate the selections made by the artist in his own home? Find out what gems - both objects and stories - Lowe found while researching hundreds of items brought out of deep storage by the curatorial team.

All events take place at Hyde Park Art Center

The Hyde Park Art Center is a not-for-profit organization that presents innovative exhibitions, primarily work by Chicago-area artists, and educational programs in the visual arts for children and adults of diverse backgrounds. The Center is funded in part by Alphawood Foundation; The Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts; The Chicago Community Trust; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and the Illinois Arts Council; Creative New Zealand; Harper Court Arts Council; Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The Irving Harris Foundation; JPMorgan Chase Foundation; The Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; The Leo S. Guthman Fund; The Mayer and Morris Kaplan Family Foundation; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Orbit Fund; Polk Bros. Foundation; The Clinton Family Fund; The Wallace Foundation; and the generosity of its members and friends.

