

AMERICAN STUDIES : THE ARTIST'S SECRETS BY PHILIP MARTIN

We are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives.

--Criswell, the '50s psychic

I don't know about anyone but me.

--Jackson Browne, "Runnin' on Empty"

If you want to know what Warren Criswell means by a painting, then perhaps you should ask him yourself. He is not so hard to find and, if you know his paintings (or prints or sculptures), then you likely know what he looks like. Or perhaps you should keep quiet and look - the art being infinitely more reliable than the artist.

If you want a label, pick one. Criswell is comedian and undertaker, no doubt a surer prophet than his charlatan namesake, the silver-haired gent at the beginning and end of *Plan 9 From Outer Space* who admonished us: "You can't prove it didn't happen."

Just so. You can't prove this Criswell's visions never occurred - if they hadn't, how could they be arrayed in these galleries? - or that they won't. Our Criswell, the one who lives in Benton, has had visions, he has put them on the wall. You can see them, if you look.

Criswell's work is never scarce in these parts, but for the next few weeks it will be even easier for the gallery-going class to find. On Thursday, a retrospective of his work opened at the Arkansas Arts Center. Little Rock's Cantrell Gallery, which has had a relationship with the artist going back to 1979, opened a show of his recent work, called "Looking Back," on May 30. His work is also part of a group show comprising the work of Arkansas Arts Council grant recipients on exhibit at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. In Hot Springs, his work is handled by Taylor's Contemporanea Fine Arts.



Coffee, a Warren Criswell work completed this year.

It is rare that an artist gets so much attention, but it's not the first time Criswell has had concurrent shows. Part of this is no doubt due to what we might call - if the term didn't have certain intimations of diminution - the "accessibility" of his work.

What we mean by this is that one doesn't have to know much about art to appreciate Warren Criswell. When the man paints a figure, you generally recognize it as something from your experience: headlights on a highway at night, topless dancers in a blue-lit nightclub, an old guy running down the road - Criswell paints with the acuity and precision of a dead Dutchman.

Another way to say this is to say his paintings look like photographs - impossible photographs to be sure, photographs of someone else's dreams and nightmares, but recognizable, unmistakable depictions of real world artifacts arrested in time. Criswell paints a shoe and you know immediately it's a shoe, rather than a splotch or color field.

Criswell isn't difficult in the sense that his "genius" - and we'll use that overused word here because it's applicable - is apparent in the same way Da Vinci's or Rembrandt's or Vermeer's is apparent (and will be so long as human eyes can behold them). They can be enjoyed by anyone - and anyone can be disturbed by them.

But the "accessibility" of Criswell's work - the fact that no one could dismiss it by comparing it to their kid's scribbles - shouldn't be taken as an argument against any higher emotive complexity. Criswell is not painting what he sees - he is not copying photographs or trying to preserve a particularly beautiful, horrible or exotic tableau. (We don't "see" the world the way cameras render it anyway, we "see" with our minds

more than our eyes.)

Still, one needn't resort to artspeak to describe Criswell's work, all one needs to do is look. This doesn't mean that artspeak isn't valuable; just that however erudite and perceptive the essays in the catalogs may be, they are written for an elite group of insiders - people who expect to contend with the sometimes circuitous constructions of an edge-walking critic seeking to explicate the work from the disadvantaged perspective of his own unreliable eyes. Though nonspeakers tend to view artspeak as a conspiracy of exclusion run on the rubes by the notalent dabblers and the insecure phonies who walk the galleries - a tongue in which it is quite easy to say much about nothing or nothing about much - those articles in artforum are not really so much jibber-jabber.

They are - or at least some of them are - a kind of dialogue between writer and artist, a working through of the writer's perception of the ideas the artist, who works in a language closer to the heart and the gut than the brain, has raised in his art. Sometimes the writer misperceives, sometimes the writer has trouble describing his perceptions, sometimes the art itself is junk. But artspeak is a kind of necessary evil when talking about the work of most artists.

It would be wrong to suggest Criswell is one of the few artists who can blast through the critical filter and speak directly to an audience; all good artists do that. It's just that with Criswell no one needs to be told what he's seeing, no one need feel intimidated by the details of the process. Criswell's process is invisible - only technicians look at his stuff and see brushstrokes and the brightening effects of lead white pigment. The rest of us see faces and ennui, the sad soft play of shadows in a desperate room at 4 a.m., a thousand anxious details caught in the interrogative flashlight of the first-person beholder.

Often we see Criswell himself, satirized, caught doing something disturbing or in difficult straits. Who else could the figure rising by the roadside, swaddled in the Sunday edition of the *Arkansas Gazette*, caught in the beam of an onrushing headlight be but Criswell himself, the artist as smashable icon? (Oh, now we see - he's a "Chrysalis.")



Warren Criswell's 1988 oil and pastel on paper, *The Open Road*.

All these are Criswells: soft and balding, mild-looking, ordinary and bespectacled, wearing expressions of gentle bewilderment and spiteful indignation. Criswell paints himself without vanity, he uses himself as a prop, a symbol for the human component.

His paintings can be read and ciphered - we might guess at the stories being told or simply accept the nervous tension of the presented tableaux as the organizing energy of the human experience. A Criswell dressed in clerical robes grills a bound and naked Criswell in a pair of paintings both titled *The Question* (1991 and 1993) and a blizzard of associations rushes in: All thinking people understand the subtleties of inquisition, and the lengths to which we're willing to go to avoid telling ourselves the truth. Is this what Criswell is getting at, or is there something less literal at work here? There are more things in heaven and earth, Sigmund, than are dreamed of in your psychology.

We know more about Criswell than his scant biography tells us - it allows that he was born in Florida in 1936 and that he received early training at the Norton School of Art. Other than that, he professes to being self-taught.

Apparently he painted for a while in his 20s, but by 1964 had decided to concentrate on writing - a quick trip around the Internet provides evidence Criswell is an astute critic of art and society. He returned to visual art in the mid-1970s, about the time he settled in Arkansas. That is perhaps all the artist wants us to know about him, though he might also welcome an extensive feature story.

In either case, a more meaningful autobiography probably can be gleaned from surveying Criswell's paintings, especially the 25 years of work gathered at the Arkansas Arts Center. For our purposes, Criswell is his body of work and the real test of Criswell's work is its ability to intrigue and unsettle, to resist quick and easy assessments.

A Criswell becomes more interesting the longer you look at it (or live with it). Criswell's paintings reward study. An educated looker might immediately decide that this artist likes allegory and paints in a neoclassic style but with Criswell, first impressions are generally misdirecting. Another person might see the humor first, and only later be discomfited by the ominous, admonitory nature of some of the images - the artist appears as prey and predator, as presumptive ritual sacrifice and object of humiliation.

Here he is a rabbi, fending off a clay Golem as an oblivious, even bored, naked woman reclines in bed. We can guess the identity of Criswell's models, we might suspect some private mythology is at work, we might devise our own narrative to fit the crime.

Across town, at Cantrell Gallery, another Criswell wanders sheepishly through a forest of female-torsoed trees (*In the Forest of the Dryads* from 1998) while a puckish lizard looks on from the foreground.

Given the nature of the artist's work and the decidedly non-narcissistic obsession with self that permeates it, we might conclude that even this grace note, this unanthropomorphized detail might represent yet another kind of Criswell. (In the catalog accompanying the Arts Center show, critic Peter Frank makes the connection between Criswell and fellow "anxious realist" Donald Roller Wilson, he of the mad partydressed apes).

It is difficult to say; the artist is everywhere, grinning and grimacing, furtive in the shadows. If you catch him maybe he'll give up his secret. Or maybe you should just see.

Full disclosure: Philip Martin owns a Warren Criswell painting - Crow Unmasked - and hopes to acquire a couple more.

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Man in a Yellow Shirt, 2002.
oil on linen, 24 x 18 inches



The Question, 1991, oil on linen, 36 x 43 inches



Golem, 1997, oil & beeswax on plywood, 36 x 48 inches



In the Forest of the Dryads,
1998, oil & beeswax on plywood, 48 x 32 inches (detail)



Sunday at Yogi's, 1979, watercolor, 24 x 36 inches



The Navigator, 1987, pastel on paper, 30 x 40 inches

This story was published Sunday, June 15, 2003.

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Crow Unmasked, 1991, pastel & oil on linen, 27 x 48 inches.

Collection of Philip & Karen Martin

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