

"...A beam or something fell eight or ten stories and smacked the sidewalk along side him. It brushed pretty close to him but didn't touch him . . . He felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works."

--Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

THE WORKS OF WARREN CRISWELL

AT THE WICHITA CENTER FOR THE ARTS

Some Notes by the Artist

This exhibition is a sampling of my paintings and works on paper done over the past 21 years, but I wouldn't want to call it a retrospective. Too many key works are unavailable at present, and besides, I'm not in retro mode yet. Give me another couple of decades. The earliest work is the watercolor *Sunday at Yogi's* (1979) and the most recent *The Samaqueca* (oil on panel, 2000).

Looking at the whole body of work, several visual themes--such as highways, the homeless, strip clubs, the ocean--are obvious. From the '70s on my work seems to have a narrative tendency, and much of the narrative material comes from fiction, philosophy, mythology, operas, movies and the history of painting.

So far I haven't said anything that viewers can't see for themselves, and I don't intend to spill my guts about the "inner content" (if any) of my images. This is not a thing an artist should talk much about, in my opinion. It can bias a viewer who might otherwise have seen something in a work that the artist is unaware of. To illustrate what I mean, here are two excerpts from texts about my paintings by very perceptive and knowledgeable critics:



Don Giovanni Impenitente, 1999, oil on linen, 48 x 36 inches

THE WORKS OF WARREN CRISWELL
(Continued)

"From a distance, a viewer could think that Warren Criswell is a faintly romantic neoclassicist, painting grand allegories with vague references to the old masters. A second look reveals that the Arkansas artist is something completely different. "Criswell, who is in his 60s, is a wildly funny self-satirist. His splendidly painted but unexpectedly comic canvases use classic motifs to explore contemporary discontent in male-female relationships. "Criswell's takeoff on Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus' is the clearest illustration of this.... Criswell's self-portrait recurs elsewhere as an armor-clad St. George on a small-town main street.... The artist's also wanders bewildered amid a dark wood of female-torsoed trees ('In the Forest of the Dryads'). In another painting, he's a rabbi menaced by the clay golem he has brought to life in a contemporary bedroom, while the unconcerned young woman beside him reads a magazine. Each of these thoroughly modern mythologies seems to tell a similar tale. The fact that the same models recur in painting after painting heightens the sense that this is all one multilayered morality play that the artist is recounting in different versions...."

From Jerry Cullum's review of an exhibition of 11 paintings by Criswell at Raymond Lawrence Gallery, Atlanta, in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Friday, Jan. 29, 1999.



*Golden Apples, 1996, oil on wood, 36 x 52 inches**



*St. George & the Dragon, 1998, oil on wood, 48 x 36 inches**

"Working with a great economy of iconographic as well as formal means, Criswell [makes] intense, uncanny, highly concentrated images of his own inner life. He has objectified not only his sexual conflicts, but his 'transcendent' position as an artist. It clearly saves him from himself: his art is the saving grace in his 'sick' scenes. It permits him to see his conflict as a kind of theater, and to regard it with irony and finally good humor, that is, as a funny if weird melodrama.

"But make no mistake: his images are grim and sinister. Not only does their tenebrism-their generally Caravaggesque realism, modified by American populist descriptive realism-testify to this, but their setting as well....

"Criswell's pictures are rooted in sexual conflict, but reach deeper, into the mystery of the self."

From the essay The Narcissistic Sinner: Warren Criswell's Pictures, by Donald Kuspit, copyright 1994 by Warren Criswell.



*The Storm, 1992, oil on linen, 48 x 36 inches,
collection Julia J. Norrell**

*Work not in this exhibition.

THE WORKS OF WARREN CRISWELL

(Continued)

At the same time I was drawing strippers and the men who watched them, working in the dark with white charcoal on black paper. I did hundreds of these drawings, taking the best of them to Cantrell Gallery in a large box, where one day some people from the Taiwan Art Center came in and bought all of them. This is how I happened to have a solo show in Taiwan. I loved the topless bars for their unashamed eroticism, but they are also linked in my mind to a year-long research project I did on the pre-patriarchal cultures of Europe and the Middle East. Before the invasions of herding societies from the northern steppes and southern deserts around the 1st millennium BCE, the civilizations around the Mediterranean were predominantly matrilineal if not matriarchal. They worshiped various forms of the Great Goddess (Mother Nature), and women evidently enjoyed a social and economic status unheard of in the patrilineal cultures that have dominated the world since that time. Beginning with Plato and continuing in Christianity, our own culture sets body and spirit against each other in an eternal struggle. But in the time of the Goddess, when she was represented by the ishtaritu--holy women, or temple prostitutes--of Sumer, Babylon and Canaan, no such antagonism existed between the erotic and the spiritual. Sexuality was considered a divine communion between the body and the spirit.

This is an alien concept for us, but I always treated the strip joints like surviving remnants of that time, now almost erased from history. Like the ancient temples these are places of female power and are feared and hated for that reason by many today just as the temples were feared and hated by the ancient invaders. They threaten the fundamental concept of patrilineal descent, which lies silent but awake just under



Blue Corners, 1987, pastel on paper, 22 x 30 inches



A Man Reading, 1995, oil on wood, 42 x 27 inches, collection of Chester Phillips

the surface of our political correctness--the concept that women are the divinely ordained property of men. The collection of Taiwan drawings was called "Ulysses at Circe's." Homer's Circe was modeled on a priestess of the Goddess in the pre-Greek period. Then as now, men are sometimes turned into pigs. The two works here which best represent this period are the pastels Watching Sandy, Blue Corners (both 1987) and the pen and ink drawing The Dressing Room (1990). But The Crab King Crossing is probably the most accurate picture of my state of mind in those years.



Watching Sandy, 1987, charcoal, pastel & acrylic on paper,
30 x 40 inches



The Crab King Crossing, 1991, oil on linen, 48 x 55 inches

THE EARTH:

... Ere Babylon was dust,
The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
Met his own image walking in the garden.
Shelly, *Prometheus Unbound*

As in the drawings of street people, I also often put myself in the bar room drawings, but never in an important position in the picture. You would have to search to find me. Around the beginning of the '90s this changed.



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



The Diver, 1993, oil on wood,
59 x 44 inches



Study for "Highway 61", 1993,
acrylic & conte crayon on
paper, 34 x 26 inches

I was reading Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and looking at Caravaggio, so I guess that together these were the main influences leading me into a long series philosophical paintings in which I seem to be the main character. But I didn't think of it that way at the time. The paintings were studies of the Self in general, not myself in particular. I was simply using myself as a convenient model. I was always available and worked cheap. The first of these paintings was *The Question* (1991). Others in the present exhibition are *The Diver*, *The Judgment*, and the drawing for *Highway 61* (all 1993).

The two main protagonists of these dramas are a Cardinal Inquisitor of the 17th century and his naked prisoner. These guys come out of a chapter of Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamozov* called "The Grand Inquisitor." In a parable told by Ivan, Christ has returned to earth during the Spanish Inquisition. He is arrested and interrogated by the Cardinal. But in my paintings both the prisoner and the Cardinal have the same face. It didn't seem important to me that it was my face, only that it was different personalities of the same person. During this time I was also doing a lot of research and experimentation in the painting techniques of the Old Masters. In an earlier period I had tried to imitate the techniques of the Van Eyck and the Northern Masters, and now those of Caravaggio, but both became too slick for me and I fell deeply under the spell of Rembrandt.



The Judgment, 1993, oil on wood, 59 x 44 inches

THE WORKS OF WARREN CRISWELL
(Continued)

The painting that finally broke the Cardinal's grip on me was *A Woman Dragging a Man* (1994). Worn out by the internal struggle, I painted myself being dragged down from the mountain by my patient and long-suffering wife. An earlier painting of the Question series was called *All the King's Horses* (1992) in which there were no figures at all, only the table where the interrogation had taken place and fragments of the broken egg, no longer glowing. Now I reconstructed myself as *Humpty Dumpty* (1994).



Humpty Dumpty,
1994, oil on
copper,
20 x 16 inches



A Woman Dragging a Man, 1994, oil on wood, 39 x 48 inches

The work of the last four or five years is too close in time for me to want to say much about, but I know as I approached the Big Six Oh in 1996 I became obsessed with Time. Like Faust, I was eager to violate its laws and ready to strike any deal the Devil might have to offer. Unfortunately, he has yet to appear. Meanwhile, the redheaded goddess of love and youth, in her divinely cruel indifference, became the central focus of my work, if not my life. She is seen here in *Salome* (1996), *The Offering* (1996), *The Seer* (1997), *Rachel Stealing the Gods* (1997), *A Man Following a Woman* (1997), *Double Indemnity* (1999), the *Black Stockings* linocuts (1999) and many others not in this exhibition. Only now is she beginning to fade, but her image still haunts my work like a ghost. (*The Samaqueca* (2000).)



When Flesh Glowed, 1995, oil on wood, 44 x 55 inches



The Offering, 1996, oil on wood, 39 x 24 inches



Rachel Stealing the Gods, 1997, oil on wood, 48 x 36 inches



Salome, 1996, oil on wood, 57 x 36 inches



The Seer, 1997, oil on wood, 36 x 24 inches



Though the Cardinal is gone for now, multiple versions of my own image have continued to appear in my work--but with a subtle difference, I think, if only in my own attitude about it. I used to be concerned about the apparent conflict between the universal and the personal aspects of art, believing the universal to be the important one. This, after all, is the reason for my argument at the beginning of these notes against spouting a lot of personal information. But now I'm thinking that maybe the universal is revealed *only* through the personal, the self only through *myself*. Whitman and Montaigne understood this. Maybe essence can be discovered only by embracing existence. And maybe I should just admit to myself that the ubiquitous male figure that just will not get out of my paintings is really me after all. This doesn't mean that anything I can say about my work is as important as what anyone else says about it, positive or negative. In any case, I think I should let the spirit/body dichotomy, which haunted my Cardinal Inquisitor, take care of itself and treat painting only as a fulfillment of desire, free of theory or agenda. Which is what I have always done anyway. A work of art has many levels, but if the surface level fails nobody cares about the other ones.

I'll close as I probably should have begun--and ended--with Balthus' famous reply to John Russell's request for material for his text on the artist's 1968 retrospective at the Tate:

NO BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS. BEGIN: BALTHUS IS A PAINTER OF WHOM NOTHING IS KNOWN. NOW LET US LOOK AT THE PICTURES.

Warren Criswell, January 1, 2000



Double Indemnity, 1999, oil on wood, 48 x 36 inches



A Man Following a Woman, 1997, oil on wood,
36 x 48 inches



The Samaqueca, 2000, oil on wood, 23.5 x 18 inches



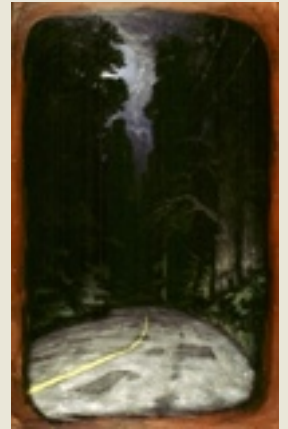
A Man Falling, 1997, oil on wood, 32 x 23 inches



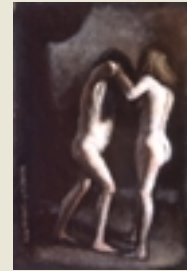
Simone Leaps from the Window, 1998, oil on wood, 10 x 8 inches



Man With a Light, 1998, pencil & oil on wood, 10 x 8 inches



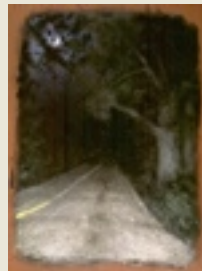
Dark Road, 1998, oil on wood, 77 x 48 inches



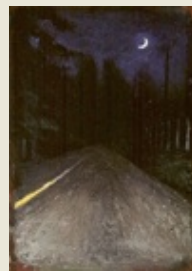
Struggle I, II & III, 1996, oil on wood, each 8 x 5 inches



Therapy I: The Voyeur, 1999, oil on wood, 20 x 24 inches



Dark Road with Tree, 1998, oil on wood, 15 x 11 inches



Dark Road, Midnight, 1998, oil on wood, 7 x 5 inches



Lion Gate, 1997, oil on wood, 48 x 36 inches



Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man,
1995, oil on wood, 42 x 56
inches



Self Portrait with Red-eye,
1998, oil on wood, 19 x 15
inches



Death Waking Time, 2/9/98,
oil on wood, 7 x 5 inches



Woman Picking up a Rock,
1995, oil on wood, 19 x 13
inches



Green Man Sleeping, 1997,
oil on wood, 3.75 x 4.5
inches



A Man Pursued, 1998, oil on wood, 14 x 19 inches



A Man Sleeping, 1997, oil on
wood, 6.5 x 5.5 inches

MORE WORKS ON PAPER



Reflections, 1980, watercolor
on board, 40 x 30 inches



Remondus axe mundi, 1991,
acrylic, oil & charcoal on
paper, 48 x 37 inches



Still Life with Yellow Pencil,
1988, silverpoint & oil on
paper, 38 x 31 inches



Study for "Highway 61",
1993, acrylic & conte crayon
on paper, 34 x 26 inches



A Woman Dragging a Man,
Study #2, charcoal & pastel
on paper, 28 x 34 inches



Study for "A Man Reading,"
1995, charcoal & acrylic on
paper, 30 x 22 inches



A Man Sleeping, 1997,
charcoal & pastel on paper,
30 x 22 inches



A Man Shooting at a Wall,
1998, charcoal, pastel & oil
on paper,
23 x 31 inches



Moondance, 1996, acrylic,
charcoal & pastel on paper,
33 x 24 inches



Double Indemnity, 1999, oil
on paper, 11 x 8 inches



Don Giovanni Impenitente,
1999, pastel on paper, 23 x
16 inches



The Samaqueca, 1999, conte
crayon & oil on bark paper,
30 x 22.5 inches



Two Women, 1995, charcoal
& acrylic on paper, 30 x 22
inches



Janet Reading with Skipper, 2000, pencil on laid paper,
8 x 11 inches



Beatus natalis, 1993,
silverpoint on prepared
paper, 10 x 7.5 inches

The Works of Warren Criswell, continued

PRINTS



Technical Note:

These prints are some of the results of my latest experiments with linoleum. Although they may resemble etchings, drypoints, lithographs or some strange hybrid, they are true relief prints, printed in two colors (not three) from two linoleum blocks. The examples shown here were printed in editions of 10 to 15. I didn't invent this technique--Picasso did--but in adapting it to my own purposes I discovered a number of new possibilities for making relief prints.

Above: *Two Women Walking*, 1999,
linocut,
image 4 x 3 3/8 inches



Double Indemnity, 1999, linocut, image 7 x 5,
sheet 10 x 8 inches



Black Stockings V, 1999
linocut, image 4 x 3 3/8,
sheet 6 1/2 x 6 inches



Black Stockings VI, 1999
linocut, image 4 x 3 3/8,
sheet 6 1/2 x 6 inches



Black Stockings VII, 1999
linocut, image 3 3/8 x 4,
sheet 6 1/2 x 6 inches



Moths, 1999, linocut,
image 7 x 5 inches



Girl on the Phone (1), 1999
linocut, image 4 x 3 3/8,
sheet 6 1/2 x 6 inches



Girl on the Phone (2), 1999
linocut, image 4 x 3 3/8,
sheet 6 1/2 x 6 inches



Janet Sleeping, 1999
linocut, image 3 3/8 x 4,
sheet 6 1/2 x 6 inches



Makeup, 1999
linocut, image 4 x 3 3/8,
sheet 6 1/2 x 6 inches



Pete I, 1999, linocut,
image 4 x 2 1/4 inches



Pete II, 1999, linocut,
image 4 x 2 1/4 inches



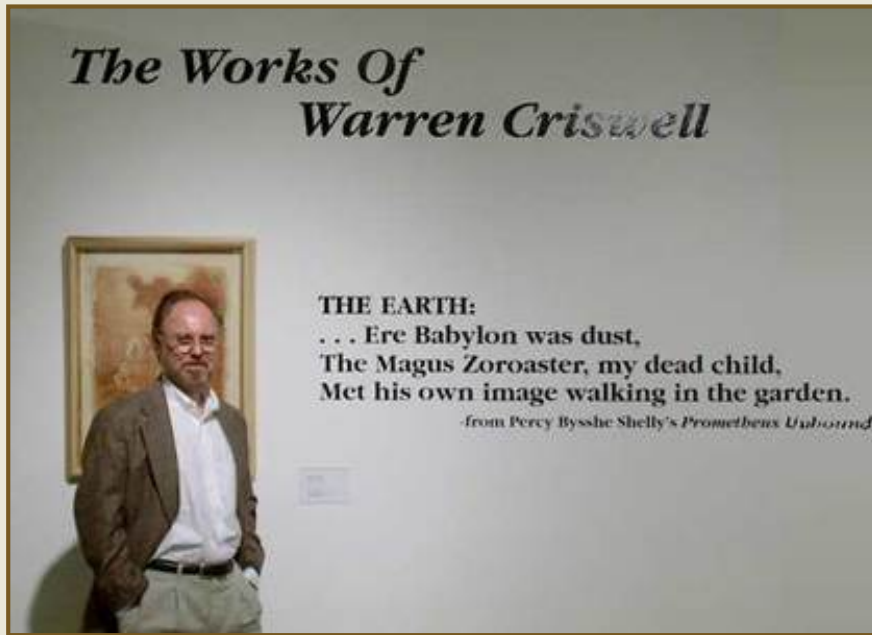
Pete III, 1999, linocut,
image 4 x 2 1/4 inches



Pete IV, 1999, linocut,
image 4 x 2 1/4 inches



A Woman Lighting a Joint, 1999,
linocut, image 4 x 3 3/8 inches



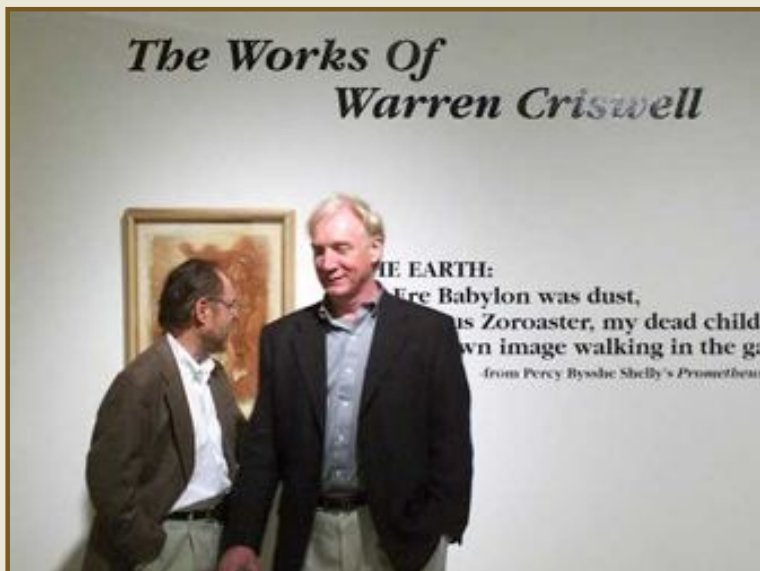
[Click images to enlarge]



East wall



Brian Hinkle, Assistant Curator



Warren and Frank Clifford



Salome, The Animation, Crab King Crossing



Nita

Stephanie Brock, Public Relations Director

Howard W. Ellington, Executive Director



Reflections, Beatus Natalis, Sunday at Yogi's



Stephanie walking. . . . A Man Reading, Hey Mr Tambourine Man, etc.