

Roger Brown (American, 1941–1997)

Homesick-Proof Space Station, 1987

Oil on canvas

48 1/4 x 72 1/8 inches

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of the Burrows Family, 2013.0001

Days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, on December 10, 1941, James Roger Brown was born in Hamilton, Alabama to James Gordon Brown and Mary Elizabeth Palmer Brown.¹ As part of the war effort, Brown's father initially lived apart from his family while working in a munitions plant in Childersburg, Alabama. During this period, his wife and eldest son (Roger) lived in Hamilton, Alabama with Cora Lee Palmer, his mother-in-law, and next door to Mary

¹ Resources for information on Brown's life and work are numerous as there are multiple exhibitions catalogues, published articles and interviews. Primary sources for this essay come from the following: Information on file, (Artist's Vertical File, MMFA Library and MMFA Objects Record File, 2011.16) Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama; Mary Matthews Gedo, "An Autobiography in the Shape of Alabama: The Art of Roger Brown," *Postmodern Perspectives, Issues in Contemporary Art*. Ed. Howard Risatti, Englewood Cliffs, JG: Prentice Hall, 1990, pp. 276-289; Mitchell Douglas Kahan, *Roger Brown*, 1980; Sidney Lawrence, Interviews relating to Roger Brown, 1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Sidney Lawrence, *Roger Brown*. New York: George Braziller in association with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; Sidney Lawrence, *Roger Brown: Southern Exposure*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007; Nick Lowe and Lisa Stone of the Roger Brown Study Collection, conversation with the author, December 1, 2011; *Roger Brown: A Different Dimension*. Montgomery, AL: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 2007; Raechell Smith and Lisa Stone, *Jesse Howard and Roger Brown: Now Read On*. Kansas City, MO: UMKC Center for Creative Studies, 2005.

Dizenia (Cora Lee's mother). "Mammy" as Mary Dizenia is known, becomes an important figure in young Brown's life. In 1945, James Brown relocates his family to Opelika, Alabama where they live on his father's cotton farm for a few years until he establishes his grocery store, Central Market. After that he settles his family (including son Gregory, born 1948) into a permanent home.

Demonstrating an interest and a natural aptitude in art from a young age, both Brown and his brother Greg took private art lessons from the second through ninth grades. Volunteer teachers fostered and nurtured Brown's artistic development. The lessons proved valuable and during his sophomore year in high school Brown designed a poster for the statewide competition *Hire the Handicapped* and won first place. In addition to the visual arts, Brown, by his junior and senior year in high school, was an active participant in a local theater group, acting in several productions.

After graduating high school in 1960 Brown traveled to New York City before attending the Bible school, David Lipscomb College in Nashville, Tennessee. The choice of school corresponds to Brown's religious upbringing within the Church of Christ, and his initial, but short-lived, desire to become a minister. Unfulfilled, Brown left the school but stayed in Nashville undertaking odd jobs and pursuing life drawing classes at the University of Tennessee, Nashville. Determined to study art, Brown applied to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) for several reasons, one because he noticed many art instructors from various colleges received their degrees from there, and two, because he had relatives in Dixon, Illinois, a town not far from the city.

Ultimately, Brown received both a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a Master of Fine Arts degree from SAIC, completing his studies in 1970 but it was not a smooth road. Prior to beginning at SAIC in 1962 Brown first spent a semester at Chicago's American Academy of Art, which promoted a program of commercial art. When Brown finally started classes at SAIC he experienced much frustration with the lack of structure in the classrooms and dropped out after only a few months to return to the American Academy and complete a program in commercial design. Brown describes his reasoning "It was like going from high school to graduate school. You are almost on your own. It's so free and open about the way the classes are...well, which is what art is about. But when you are from southern schools, so conservative an atmosphere. I wasn't ready for that. I was much more ready for the stuff at the American Academy."²

Brown resumed his studies part-time at SAIC in 1964 while also working as a commercial artist creating decals at the Chicago Decal Company. Beginning in 1965, Brown became a full-time student and took classes with both Roy Yoshida and Whitney Halstead, two professors who each had a great impact on Brown's development as an artist. Both Yoshida and Halstead broadened their students' education far beyond fine art. Yoshida challenged and encouraged his students to incorporate personal elements into their work while building their confidence in what they accomplished. Halstead took his students to The Field Museum introducing them to arts of other cultures and Yoshida would take students to Maxwell Street Market, urging them to find what Yoshida termed 'trash treasures.' In fact, often among the students and friends there were contests to find the best items for a dollar. At Maxwell Street, Brown first encountered several self-taught artists whose work he personally collected and helped bring to wider recognition.

Brown's fellow students, including Eleanor Dube, Philip Hanson and Christina Ramberg, became friends and exhibition partners with whom he participated in the group presentation *The*

² From interview transcripts with Sidney Lawrence, 1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

False Image at the Hyde Park Art Center in 1968. These artists, along with Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Kerig Pope, Barbara Rossi, and Karl Wirsum grew to fame as the Chicago Imagists³. The Imagists' style "centered on emotionally charged transformation of imagery whether from the real world or the popular media, a high degree of pictorial incident, manipulation of figure-ground relationships, strong color, vivid patterning, and an emphasis on painting as object."⁴ Although often grouped with the Imagists, Brown's oeuvre sits uneasily within this categorization. In fact, his work stretched beyond their stylistic constraints to occupy a place that is uniquely his.

Certainly, the objects and works of art by self-taught artists that Brown discovered during these trips to Maxwell Street and other places had an impact on his own style. The patterning and forms apparent in Joseph Yoakum's (American, 1890–1972) work, for example, influenced Brown's sense of shapes and patterns.⁵ Many works in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago also excited Brown and stimulated his thinking and approach to his work. In particular, Georgia O'Keeffe's (American, 1887–1986) *Sky Above Clouds IV*, 1965 (Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago) had an impact; the way O'Keeffe portrayed light, illuminating the objects from within and the way she dealt with cloud forms was a strong influence. Other artists also provided inspiration: Giorgio de Chirico (Italian, 1888–1978), Edward Hopper (American, 1882–1967) and René Magritte (Belgian, 1898–1967). Outside of the visual arts, Brown strongly identified with country music, likening his paintings to a visual representation of the same content and stories found in country songs.⁶ Moreover, Brown felt that being from the American South also had a great impact on his work.



Georgia O'Keeffe, American, 1887–1986, *Sky Above Clouds IV*, 1965, Oil on canvas, 243.8 x 731.5 cm (96 x 288 in.), Restricted gift of the Paul and Gabriella Rosenbaum Foundation; gift of Georgia O'Keeffe, 1983.821, The Art Institute of Chicago

Brown expressed a lack of interest in Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, the predominant art styles of the day. Instead, he created images based on recognizable vernacular imagery and, while Brown shied away from the label "narrative painter," he recognized that narrative is an important aspect of his work.⁷ His individual style encompasses certain hallmarks: use of pattern, strong angles, and a shifting perspective often rendered in a palette primarily consisting of grey, pine green, black, yellow, white, and light blue all bordered by black outlines. Bringing these compositional elements to varied subjects of rural landscapes, political events, and works from his imagination, Brown evokes an unnerving psychological element.

Deceptively simple, and reminiscent of comic art and advertising, Brown's work is complex and sophisticated. Though referencing reality, his works are very stylized. In a sense, Brown is a history painter, recording a distinctly American landscape. He perceives art to be a way to communicate and he does so by portraying places and events of his time. For example, Brown turns his brush to events such as the assassination of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, the

³ Many of these artists showed together as the group the Hairy Who, but the group merged and grew into the Imagists, with many exhibitions following that would feature some or all of the artists.

⁴ Russell Bowman in Mitchell Kahan, *Roger Brown*, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1980, p. 19.

⁵ While Yoakum used pattern in discrete areas to build his compositions, Brown began layering and using them as a device to fill the picture plane. However, as Bowman suggests, for both artists, the use of pattern became a visual language. For a fuller discussion of this see Russell Bowman in Mitchell Kahan, *Roger Brown*, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1980, pps.21-22, 24.

⁶ Roger Brown interview with Joy Wagner, WXPW Radio Station, recorded October 22, 1987.

⁷ From interview transcripts with Sidney Lawrence, 1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

nuclear reactor disaster at Three Mile Island, the *Serbo-Croatian War*, as well as natural disasters. Yet, he deals to some extent with illusion and ambiguity, by integrating satire and often a critical commentary with humor and irony. Poet and art critic John Yau explains, "His work can be said to explore the foundations of our socially conditioned perceptions. In doing so, he has revealed the disturbing extent to which various states—horror, irony, and boredom—mesh."⁸ While not all his works deal with disasters, there is an undercurrent of unease throughout his body of work.

Brown's stable of motifs include high-rise buildings that have an anthropomorphic quality; crescent, scalloped, pillow-like shape clouds (inspired both by Asian art and Georgia O'Keeffe's clouds); space rendered flat with very little depth (influenced by the work of the 15th c. Italians Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia [1403–1483] and Giovanni di Consolo, known as Il Sassetta [1392–1941]); luminous light; and silhouetted people styled in clothing and hair styles from the 1940s. Writer and curator Russell Bowman, defines Brown's work as having an "emblematic style", one that incorporates "a complete pictorial and expressive language" that relates both to the world as well as to imaginary elements.⁹ Brown agreed with this assessment stating, "I am interested in things being emblematic; to create your own vocabulary as an artist and use those [motifs] over and over again. That's been a simple way for me to do it. It varies from time to time."¹⁰ In fact, Brown felt that this use of emblems and creating a simplified visual language is a way to make the work of art easy to read and understand. He stated,

One of the things I have always thought is important is simplification. There has to be complexity in a painting, but to make things instantly readable is very important. I'm much more tolerant of different ways of looking at a painting than I used to be. But, then, I'm more experienced now; the more you see, the more you understand and read paintings. But people who are just beginning to look at painting can have problems with complexity. That's why I am very interested in simplifying and making a painting easy to read. Reducing a certain form so you can repeat it over and over again, and then continually adding new form and getting more complex as you go along is what I am trying to do.¹¹

Response to Brown's work was generally strong and positive, although several critics in Chicago, who favored more abstract work, did not initially promote him.¹² The first museum to acquire works was the Art Institute of Chicago, which purchased several prints in 1969. The Phyllis Kind Gallery of Chicago and New York began representing Brown in 1971 and Brown had his first major museum exhibition at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts from October 5–November 23, 1980. Since then, Brown's work has been acquired by numerous collections and exhibited worldwide.

The place in which Brown lived and worked was always extremely important to him. While being from the South certainly had an impact in the way he approached many of his subjects, so did his other living environments. In 1974 Brown purchased a storefront property on North Halsted Street in Chicago and had his partner, architect George Veronda convert it into both a home

⁸ John Yau, in Sidney Lawrence, *Roger Brown*, p. 15.

⁹ Russell Bowman in Mitchell Kahan, *Roger Brown*, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1980, p. 21.

¹⁰ From interview transcripts with Sidney Lawrence, 1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹¹ John Yau, quoting Brown from an Interview with Russell Bowman, "An Interview with Roger Brown," *Art in America*, 66, no. 1 (January-February 1978): 107 in Sidney Lawrence, *Roger Brown*, p. 13.

¹² Brown, in his fashion, skewered these critics in the painting *Giotto and His Friends: Getting Even*, 1981 (Private Collection).

and studio. Here, Brown surrounded himself with his personal collection of artists' works and artifacts. After several years, Brown longed for a retreat away from the city and relocated just a few hours away in New Buffalo, Michigan. Veronda once again designed this space, completing the project in 1982. Brown, for many years spent time at both places. In 1988, Brown looked to leave the Midwest, finding a property in the beach town of La Conchita, California and hiring architect Stanley Tigerman to complete a studio. Once complete, in 1993, Brown relocated permanently and in 1995–96 Brown gifted his Chicago and New Buffalo homes and studios, along with works of art and his collection to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Upon his death in 1997, his California residence was bequeathed to the school for the express purpose of selling it to help finance the Roger Brown Study Collection.

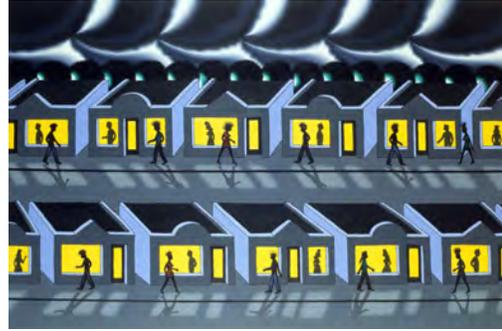
Toward the end of his life Brown felt the pull of the South once again, and targeted one more property for purchase. Despite knowing he had limited time, Brown undertook plans for a new space in Beulah, Alabama to convert a structure that he admired in childhood. Brown died on November 22, 1997 from liver failure, two days shy of the closing date on this property. His parents and brother purchased the property in his memory, restoring it to Brown's specifications and opening it to the public as the Roger Brown Memorial Rock House Museum on Brown's birthday in 1999.

Homesick-Proof Space Station brings together two areas of interest to Brown: home and space. Both the psychological and the physical elements of comfort in his living and working space, where he chose to spend most of his time, were of great importance to the artist. Illustrating this is Brown's close involvement with not only his partner George Veronda on the designs for both the Chicago home and studio and the New Buffalo, Michigan home and studio, but also with Stanley Tigerman on the plans for his studio and residence in La Conchita, California. Brown also spent much time sketching and conceptualizing the space in Beulah, Alabama, which he was not able to realize. For Brown, the way he structured his living space, both architecturally and in the way he filled his home with other artists' works and objects that had personal meaning demonstrates how his environment created a sense of physical ease as well as a sense of wellbeing.

Brown uses few colors in the large horizontal painting, *Homesick-Proof Space Station*, which evokes his Chicago neighborhood. The background, a deep space littered with stars, is deep/midnight blue and dotted with small but varied white dots. Hovering at the center of the painting, completely isolated in space and angled with the front downward, is Brown's depiction of a space station resembling an urban neighborhood transposed into space. Comprised of a grid-like floating community, there are two gray vertical roads intersecting a long main horizontal road that bends upwards at the left. Anchoring both ends of the horizontal road and the bottoms of the two vertical streets are four light blue spaceship hangers resembling Quonset Huts. Two other short roads jut outward, one from each of the lower vertical roads. Neither of these roads, nor the upper left vertical road have a building to function as a termination point; instead they open directly into space. All the roads all have black edging to depict curbs and sitting in the hanger at the top left of the grid is a space shuttle. Seen within the backlit yellow cockpit window are two silhouetted pilots preparing for flight.

Opposite the hanger, at the far end of the road, is a large church. Between these two structures and lining all the routes are eighteen homes or brownstone-like apartment buildings rendered in dove gray with some walls highlighted in periwinkle blue. Outlined in black, each building has a black roof (except the church which features a blue roof). Indeed, Brown painted city buildings with peaked roofs and curved or crow-stepped gables in several works from around the same time, *Coast of California*, 1987 (Private Collection), and *The Young and the Self Conscious*,

1991 (Private Collection). Brown created all three paintings while living in New Buffalo, just prior to moving to his new home in La Conchita. By painting buildings that mimic the profile of his building in Chicago in this series of works, Brown demonstrates that he still felt emotionally tied to Chicago in many ways despite no longer living there. *Homesick-Proof Space Station* is another work in which Brown sought to replicate an environment that brought him pleasure. In this piece Brown suggests that the space station is a place of emotional comfort. He depicts a thriving community where the physical architecture resembles one of his homes on earth, a place where he felt solace and contentment. Furthermore, he includes another of his signature elements in an image that reminded him of and referenced his parents: the 1940s hairstyles—the pompadour and bouffant—on the silhouetted men and women. His parents, who he loved deeply, always provided support and remained a part of his life even when he was far from his first home.



Roger Brown, American, 1941-1997, *The Young and the Self Conscious*, 1991, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in., private collection. © The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Brown family

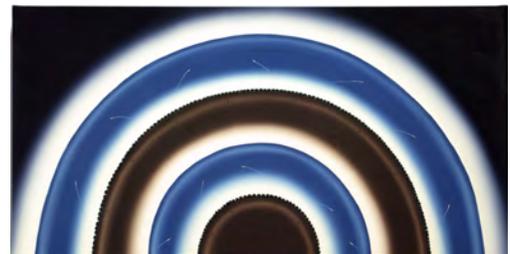


Roger Brown, *Homesick-Proof Space Station* (detail)

Brown changed his residences three times: from Alabama to Chicago, Chicago to New Buffalo, Michigan, and Michigan to La Conchita, California. He also hoped to return to Alabama. These multiple moves, and his desire to continually look for something new and find a new place to call home, are symbolically charted in *Homesick-Proof Space Station*. Here, he depicts "human progress into distant realms as tethered to the centrality of "home" in our lives."¹³ Furthering this idea is the rocket ship with orange, yellow, and red fiery contrails blasting off at an angle into space from the area of Chicago or the Midwest, the area where Brown moved after leaving Alabama. This investigation into the themes of home and space also occur in other works by Brown. For example, the painting *View of the Earth From Outer Space*, 1980

(Rockford Art Museum, IL), which functions, in some ways, as a counterpoint to *Homesick-Proof Space Station*. In this work, Brown portrays the earth in a series of brown, white, and blue semi-circular rings seen from above. The focus is the earth rather than the skies as in *Homesick-Proof Space Station* but both viewpoints originate in space. Scattered around the planet are white "rockets," yet, this piece suggests both inner and outer space, as according to Brown these shooting white marks actually represent spermatozoa.¹⁴

Another work clearly illustrating Brown's investigations into outer space and America's space program is the print, *Cathedrals in Space*, 1983. This work, like *Homesick-Proof Space Station*, references the idea of home. However, in this piece Brown refers to his



Roger Brown, American, 1941-1997, *View of the Earth From Outer Space*, 1980, oil on canvas, 18 x 35.75 in., Collection of Rockford Art Museum, Illinois, USA, Gift of Francis and June Spiezer

¹³ Lisa Stone via email correspondence with the author, February 16, 2013.

¹⁴ Brown mentioned this to the original owner of the painting, June Spiezer, and she relates the information in the Teacher Guide for the Rockford Art Museum's Teacher Guide from the exhibition *The Francis and June Spiezer Collection*. http://www.rockfordartmuseum.org/DOWNLOADS/SPIEZER_TEACHER_guide.pdf

childhood home, the South. Here, Brown links religion with the NASA space program in Alabama. Located in Huntsville, The Marshall Space Flight Center was an integral part of sending up the Columbia space shuttles missions. The first flight occurred in 1981, and the second flight took place the same year of this print in 1983. By linking the form of the rocket ship with the vaulting of a cathedral, Brown references the way that humankind elevates and



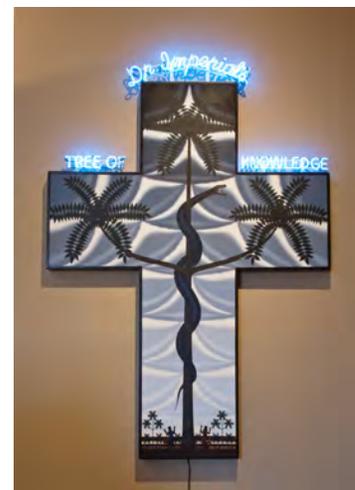
Roger Brown, *Cathedrals of Space*, 1983, color lithograph and screen print on paper, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association Purchase, 1999.14.1

venerates the power of technological and scientific advances. He poses the question, what do we worship now? How have our concepts of spirituality and power evolved over time? Questions such as this are not unnatural to the artist. Perhaps being from the South, where religion is a larger part of the culture than in the North, Brown found it natural to explore the subject in various ways.

Brown's conflicted relationship with organized religion became a theme throughout much of his art. As an adult, Brown did not practice a specific religion but he drew upon his conservative upbringing within the Church of Christ and his experience of attending revivals during his childhood. Beginning in 1981, Brown explored religion through a series dedicated to Bible stories, creating Biblically based or derived visual narratives that present familiar stories with layered, and often ambiguous, meanings. Even earlier, starting in in 1975, Brown created a series of seven crucifixion paintings that culminated in a later eighth work, *Dr. Imperial's Tree of Knowledge*, 1995. The symbol of the cross not only relates to Brown's religious upbringing but also references 15th-century works by Sieneese painters and reflects his familiarity with Georgia O'Keeffe's painting *Black Cross*, New Mexico 1929

from the Art Institute of Chicago's collection. Religion also plays a part in *Homesick-Proof Space Station*. In this painting the church is less critically interpreted, and instead symbolizes community. In fact, *Homesick-Proof Station* evokes the power of community to create safety and comfort. To ward off the feeling of homesickness, Brown replicates in space a neighborhood found in in his home on earth. Although isolated in this serene image, the comforts of home are available: secure and familiar living spaces, a sense of community, and the solace of one's faith. Furthermore, the main road of the space station function as short runways demonstrating the ease of travel between the space station and earth.

Within *Homesick-Proof Station* Brown created a small, but populated village, with eighty-five people occupying the buildings. Seen through almost every window, backlit from within with Brown's signature bright yellow, the silhouetted people are generally portrayed alone and in profile from above the waist or shoulders. The only variants are at the church, which features multiple figures inside each leaded window, one large picture window that portrays a man and a woman facing each other in the middle of the painting, and one male figure in a building at the far left who points to the right. Throughout the space station, six additional people venture outside of the buildings each remaining near a street corner or a building. All walk purposefully; Brown depicts them all in mid-stride with the exception of one figure at the lower left of the grid rooted in a wide stance, bent slightly at the



Roger Brown, *Dr. Imperial's Tree of Knowledge*, 1985, oil on canvas with neon, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts Association Purchase, 2011.16

waist, and pointing out into the nothingness of space. These men cast shadows from a light source that illuminates the space station, but the shadows fall inconsistently from several directions, thus it is impossible to pinpoint the source of the light. Rendered in black paint, the bulky figures appear to wear a spacesuit and a black bubble outlines each head to represent a space helmet.

Although floating in space, Brown still tethers the space station to earth by portraying our planet beneath the space station. Centered at the bottom of the painting and ranging approximately twenty inches across, he illustrates a hemisphere depicting a portion of Earth. Revealing North America and Mexico surrounded by water, the land is painted a rich deep brown with the edges flowing to a lighter tan. The adjoining water is white at the shoreline and moves into aqua green and then a deep blue. Ringing the planet is a band of pure white almost two inches wide that shifts into gradients of blue. This gradual shifting of colors blending earth into space situates our planet in the larger cosmos, and perhaps indicates man's ties to the universe through both space exploration and their dreams. Despite the fact that humans often focus on what is happening on earth, Brown reminds us of future possibilities in space. Certainly, while temporary space station living is a reality, it is only trained astronauts in a highly technological and controlled environment that participate in this endeavor. Today in 2013, Brown's version of the *Homesick-Proof Space Station* is still a science fiction fantasy, albeit a more simplified version than the science fiction portrayed in movies or television. This simplicity is typical of Brown's stylizing his images. Yet, by stripping away all but the necessary components Brown is able to subtly convey his ideas in a powerful way. For example, the space station, as Brown depicts it, appears self-contained with a controlled atmosphere (as evidenced in the lack of helmets worn in the buildings). However, it is not truly self-sustaining as there are no apparent food sources, or other conveniences or necessities that truly make a neighborhood work. Instead, Brown presents a symbolic scene of "home", an idealized hope for the future, one where humans can cohabitate peacefully and simply out in the greater universe.

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