

BLOUINARTINFO

MODERN PAINTERS MAGAZINE

NEW YORK

Roger Brown

DC Moore Gallery // January 8–February 2

BROWN, A MEMBER of the loosely defined, late 1960s Chicago Imagists group, is known for paintings that mine pop-culture imagery for social or political commentary. But given that he was raised a devout member of the Church of Christ and that almost every painting in this exhibition was created during his nearly decade-long struggle with illness prior to his death in 1997, it is hard not to view the paintings through a spiritual lens as well.

Brown's signature comic book-style silhouette figures are present in most of the works but are significant only in their insignificance: They appear miniature, dwarfed by vast, majestic monuments of nature. Titled like a Whistler painting, *Arrangement in Blue and Gray: The Artist and His Friend Fishing*, 1985, depicts a single beam of light emerging from pillowy, leaflike patterns in the sky—a frequent motif in Brown's work—barely illuminating a diminutive boat on blue waves. Brown's tiny surrogates for humanity seem powerless before incomprehensible forces of nature.

Less overtly, a certain harmony prevails in Brown's formal design; rather than standing in mechanical opposition to the natural world, his abstract patterns seem to be an extension of it, casting an otherworldly glow over even his more wry work. Almost every canvas in the show contains some nod to early 20th-century American modernism: Curved lines recall a Georgia O'Keeffe sky in *Winter Storm II*, 1993; in *Study for Daedalus and Icarus Mural*, 1989, two identical figures float in opposition to the picture plane like a mythological version of Winslow Homer's *Right and Left*. And just as modernist predecessors used the American landscape as a backdrop for experiments in abstraction, Brown imposes abstract form over regional topography—even when including the urban landscape. *Rising Above It All*, 1978, is a nightmarish cityscape, with a circle of sinister skyscrapers closing in on that same leaf-patterned sky. Viewed from a distance, even this dizzying city scene morphs into a perfectly balanced flower, the tall buildings appear as decorative petals over soft inner folds lit with their own celestial glow.

Brown's technique succeeds in that even his unsettling subject matter is emotionally resonant. Through repetitive floral patterns and soft glowing light (the coherent glue that binds these paintings together), specificities of time and place effectively melt away. Though much of his art is deeply rooted in the particular moment in which it was created, these images evoke a more transcendent response, as we, plantlike, gravitate naturally toward the suggestion of light. —Georgina Wells



Roger Brown
Rising Above It All, 1978. Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in.