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On a mission to make Roger Brown a household name

The late Imagist is one of the most underappreciated artists to come out of Chicago. Gallery owner Kavi Gupta wants to change that.

CHRIS LAMORTE 

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Gallery owner Kavi Gupta with Roger Brown's "Hollywood With the Stars."

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The late Imagist Roger Brown is one of the most underappreciated artists to come out of Chicago. Gallery owner Kavi Gupta wants to change that.

In contemporary art circles, Chicago gallery owner Kavi Gupta is perhaps best known for his ability to see the future. With two namesake West Loop gallery spaces and a Little Village multiuse space, as well as a perennial presence at [Expo Chicago](#) at Navy Pier (Sept. 13-17), he's helped steer the artistic careers of the young, the up-and-coming, the edgy. International superstar Theaster Gates came to the world's attention while represented by Gupta (Gates is now represented by Los Angeles-based Regan Gallery in the U.S.); Gupta also reps well-regarded artists [Tony Tassett](#) and [Mickalene Thomas](#).

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Despite his reputation as the guy who can pinpoint the Next Big Thing, a new mission has Gupta looking backward. In 2015, he began representing the work of legendary Chicago artist Roger Brown, who died in 1997, on behalf of the School of the Art Institute, the trustee of Brown's estate. Gupta is determined to reintroduce the world to Brown—one of the biggest names to come out of Chicago's art scene, but one whose work art insiders lament is sorely underappreciated, not to mention undervalued.

"Since Brown's passing, his career didn't continue like it should have," Gupta says. "He should be on par with many, many different artists of his peer group and generation, and that hasn't happened."

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Manuel Martinez

Roger Brown's mosaic of Daedalus and Icarus on the frieze above the entrance to 120 N. LaSalle St. in the Loop.

Gupta has been a fan of Brown's work since he discovered it as an undergraduate at Northern Illinois University, and he has a plan. It's a multipronged strategy involving museum shows, lectures, publications and acquiring every major Brown work he can get his hands on.

It looks like the strategy is already paying off. Big gallery shows are on the horizon, prices are starting to climb and people are talking about Brown again. In fact, the past year has witnessed a veritable Brown renaissance, fairly extraordinary for an artist who has been dead for 20 years.

Brown came to prominence in the late 1960s as part of a group of artists usually referred to as the Chicago Imagists, which includes Ed Paschke, Jim Nutt and Christina Ramberg. Imagists showed collaboratively in groups including the Hairy Who and the False Image, coming to define Chicago's scene in much the same way Andy Warhol and the Pop Artists defined New York's.



The Imagists haven't reached the same stratospheric heights, however. Brown's style is recognizable for moody landscapes and enigmatic, sometimes sinister cityscapes, though he's worked in many mediums. If you've ever glanced up at the mosaic of Daedalus and Icarus on the frieze above the entrance to 120 N. LaSalle St. in the Loop, you've seen his work.



Don Baum

Roger Brown and his dog Elvis in La Conchita, Calif., circa 1994-5.

Brown left a bequest to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he received his bachelor of fine art degree in 1968 and master of fine art in 1970. The bequest includes a Stanley Tigerman-designed house in La Conchita, Calif., and his unsold works from Phyllis Kind Galleries in New York and Chicago.

But Brown was a benefactor to SAIC before then. In 1995, he donated his ultra-modernist weekend home in New Buffalo, Mich.—designed by his partner, architect George Veronda, who died in 1984—to the school, which now uses it for staff and artist retreats. The following year, SAIC purchased his home studio at 1926 N. Halsted St. An avid collector and vocal advocate of folk and self-taught art, Brown donated the contents, including 25 of his paintings, to be sold to assist in maintaining the house.



Kavi Gupta and SAIC

"California Gawkers: Being the Chief Cause and Primary Source of California Traffic Jams," 1997

Since then, SAIC has preserved the studio as the artist left it. Now known as the Roger Brown Study Collection, it's part folk art museum, part resource for students, part shrine to the artist and his life, collections and 1967 Ford Mustang.

But the school was conservative with the limited inventory of Brown's paintings, says Lisa Stone, curator of the study collection. "It was a time the art market was pretty low," she says. So when it came to sales "we were advised to take our time and think it through carefully, which we did."

In 2003, the school hired Russell Bowman, chief curator and director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, to represent the estate. By the time Bowman closed his gallery space in 2015 and Gupta took the reins, the estate's cupboard was getting bare.



Kavi Gupta and SAIC

"Killer Crab," 1986

GUPTA'S CHALLENGE: INVENTORY

"There are very few (Brown) paintings left in the estate, which is the problem," Gupta says. And on the secondary market, Brown's work has not kept pace with the explosion in interest in contemporary art—or its prices, he says. "Galleries were selling works at what we thought were very low prices given the value of the work. And it kept the value of the work very low." So rather than sell, he wants to acquire to help re-establish baseline prices. He's

tracking down the owners of various Browns and "looking to bring back into the estate as many works as we can find," he says.

Gupta has his work cut out, says Karen Lennox, a Chicago art dealer and consultant. Lennox worked for Brown's original dealer, Phyllis Kind Gallery, and has sold his work as an independent dealer. "The difficult uphill road for Kavi, in my view, is that so many of the great works are buried in old Chicago collections," she says. "The owners A) cannot bear to part with them and B) if they decide they will, their kids basically snatch (them) because they grew up around these Roger Browns and they claim they don't want to sell at any parting price."

The highest price paid for a Brown, at least at a public auction, was just over \$80,000 in 2011, according to Artnet.com. By way of rough comparison, in 2015 Jim Nutt's 1991 painting "Gulf" sold for \$365,000, according to Artnet.



Kavi Gupta and SAIC

"California Cloud Surprise," 1993

Stone points to another issue: "Brown has been stalled in the Imagist genre for some time, and I think it's a restricting category. Kavi and his team are working to position his work in new contexts."

Last September, for instance, Gupta staged "Andy Warhol & Roger Brown: Politics, Rhetoric, Pop," a two-artist exhibition at his Elizabeth Street gallery that juxtaposed the two contemporaries for the first time, along with a series of symposiums on their lives and work.

This October, the summer master of Fondazione Prada in Milan, Germany

This October, the superstar curator of Fondazione Prada in Milan, Germano Celant, will feature Brown's work as part of a prominent show called "Famous Artists From Chicago. 1965-1975" alongside shows of artists H.C. Westermann and Leon Golub, also major artists from Chicago. "A show like the Foundation Prada's show is an enormous opportunity," Lennox says. "People love and worship these artists, and (they) really want to see the work be exposed for the first time in decades to a European audience."



"My House in the Dunes," 1982; "Pronghorn Diorama," 1987

And in Chicago at Art Expo, Celant will discuss the Chicago Imagists at Art Expo's interactive discussion area open to the art fair's VIPs. Gupta has also arranged for Celant to lead a small, private group of art insiders on a tour of the Roger Brown Study Collection in Lincoln Park.

Another group show featuring some of Brown's work at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., this winter—plus an ongoing spate of acquisitions, publications and programming on the horizon—has Gupta feeling optimistic about Brown's legacy. "Sometimes it just takes a catalyst," he says. "Someone to really want to believe in it and go all in. That's something our gallery is really good at."

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