



Kucera also says, “So much of his work is centered on Lake Gogebic that one has the impression his world pivoted around the lake.” And it did. Brian’s prints are a complex symbol system of images and mythic echoes which engendered both the Native American “hybrid” creature and the European fairy tales. Fred Brian read closely the native Great Lakes Ojibwe legends of the Windigo and Nanabozho characters, and the European story traditions brought to Michigan’s U.P. by the Finns, the Swedes, the Welsh miners and others who settled there. What is most fascinating is not that Brian employed these four very different themes in his prints, but how these themes are so often interlaced; how his prints are deeply referential to place, to a complexity of mythologies, and to the integrity of the individual imagination.

Fred Brian was an artist who made, out of personal experience and a deeply sensitive awareness of place, a wholly personal mythological vision.



Ben Mitchell is former Curator of Collections and Exhibitions for the Art Center of Battle Creek in Michigan.

“Fred Brian — The Archeology of a Personal Mythology” was written for *Passages North* and is reprinted with permission from the author and the magazine.

Passages North is a literary journal created in 1979 to stimulate and recognize writing of high quality in the Upper Midwest. For more information on the publication visit www.passagesnorth.com.

For more information about Fred Brian visit www.fredbrian.net.

List of illustrations

- Cover: “Boat Chaser IV” — wood engraving
- Page 2: “Fisherman” — intaglio
- Page 3: “Shore Spirit” — wood engraving and letterpress
- Page 4: “Plane Under Attack” — stone lithography
- Page 5: “Mrs. Bayliss” — wood engraving
- Page 6: Fred Brian on Slate River; photo by Phil Kucera

FRED BRIAN:

Lake Gogebic Memories and Myths

October 21 - December 5, 2024



MERWIN GALLERY

Ames School of Art and Design
Illinois Wesleyan University
6 Ames Plaza West
Bloomington, Illinois 61701-2900

Gallery Hours
Monday - Friday 12-4PM
Tuesday Evening 7-9PM
Saturday & Sunday 1-4PM



out openings in the forests supporting lichen, fern, a succession of wildflowers ... stark, lonely and often fog-bound rocky beaches on Lake Superior, as well as hundreds of inland lakes. The Superior Basin is not an easy, inviting or forgiving country. It can be unimaginably severe — beautifully, terrifyingly severe.

It is important to dwell a moment on this landscape, for Fred Brian is first and most importantly an artist of place: a place which becomes, through his prints, a complex visual world composed of the natural wilderness of the Upper Great Lakes, the wilderness of the artist’s own imaginative powers, and the wilderness of Native American mythology and Upper Peninsula folklore.

Phil Kucera, former owner of the Pine Tree Gallery in Ironwood, MI, and long-time friend of Fred Brian’s, identifies these essential themes in Brian’s prints:

“Fred’s personal mythology comes from early childhood memories on Lake Gogebic and from images derived from family photo albums going back close to the turn of the century. A second group of images relate to effigy figures, grotesque faces or masks which are accurate representations of artifacts from mound sites in Illinois and other parts of the midwest (for a time, Fred worked at archeological sites as a scientific illustrator.) The third element, known to anthropologists as a ‘hybrid’ figure, is a subject that continually appears in North American native mythology. The hybrid will be seen as a half human, half animal creature. And Willy Burmeister is the fourth theme, an Upper Peninsula folk hero purely out of Fred’s imagination, but of a type of U.P. hero we all talk about.”

Fred Brian: The Archeology of a Personal Mythology

from an essay by Ben Mitchell, 1989



PRINTMAKER FRED BRIAN was born in Normal, Illinois, in 1924 and raised in Bloomington, Illinois, and during the summers in Gogebic County, Michigan. In 1947 he began studying printmaking after serving in World War II as a pilot, and in 1960 he enrolled in the Art Department at the University of Iowa. He began teaching at Illinois

Wesleyan University in 1952 and spent his entire career there until his retirement in 1984, when he moved to Stillwater, Minnesota, home until his death in 1999.

In 1950, American academic art programs, as well as the whole fabric of American life, were undergoing tremendous changes. Fred Brian's colleague at Illinois Wesleyan, Dr. Timothy Garvey, wrote in the catalog which accompanied a retrospective of Brian's work in 1985: "At Iowa the change was perhaps greater than elsewhere because of a dramatic shifting of loyalties attending faculty replacements. Reaction against the Regionalism of former artist-in-residence Grant Wood had grown intense throughout the '40s. If Abstract Expressionism had not yet penetrated from New York to Iowa City in any meaningful way by 1950, faculty like Mauricio Lasansky and James Lechay were introducing their Midwestern students to many of the same sources which had prompted the post-war directions of Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and others of the New York circle."

But Brian was a young student then. What is perhaps most significant in the impressive body of work he has since produced over a long and active career is not the inheritance of European modernism and East Coast-based formalism and experimentation — though the formal elements of composition, a strong and sure use of line and a rare subtlety of tone are always present in Brian's prints. Rather, the strength in his work is the force and integrity of a personal mythology he has discovered and attempted to explicate.



From half a mile away
you see him on the shore,
sawing wood or dancing.
You hear the drum,
and closer in, he isn't there
at all.



Fred Brian was an artist with a fully personal and deeply spiritual vision. And it is this spiritual dimension in his work which is most compelling. His images are a record of a landscape where psychological and imaginative forces are at play with perceptions of the still-unspoiled, at times terrifyingly wild, region we know as the North Country.

Brian's family began spending summers in Michigan's Gogebic County as far back as 1916. By 1923, they had purchased land and built a house on Lake Gogebic. The Brian family still owns the house and they continue to spend summers there. Fred said of those early years, "I was raised on story telling. My parents, relatives and their friends sat around nights and told fascinating stories — not really conscious of 'story telling' but just talking. All the stories were based on truth, but interwoven with myths, local legends and superstitions. And up there, the nights are spooky, scary. A great stage set for weird things to happen — the things that are often in my prints."

For anyone who has not been in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and especially its westernmost regions, it is difficult to understand that much of this country is a wilderness, untameable, impervious to development schemes. There are thousands of square miles of pines, impenetrable tamarack and tag alder swamps ... burned-

