Brotherly Love

explores his life in relation to siblings Harry, Ned, and Mark (the dedicatees), with interwoven historical pairings (Edwin and John Wilkes Booth, Vincent and Theo van Gogh, etc.). Here is a vivid taste of the personal passages, from the book’s beginning:

If the handful of black-and-white snapshots that remain from my childhood is any indication, it’s a wonder I didn’t end up with a permanent crick in my neck from literally and figuratively looking up to my older brother. Harry was born 20 months before me, and I worshiped him with an intensity that must have been both flattering and bewildering to the worshippee. I didn’t want to be like Harry; I wanted to be Harry. I cocked my coon-skin cap exactly the way he did when we played Daniel Boone; I made the same pshew-pshew sounds he did when I pulled the trigger on my silver plastic six-shooter; I punched the pocket of my baseball glove every time he punched his. When he woke me in the middle of the night one Christmas Eve and invited me downstairs to open presents while our parents slept, I followed. When he said he could help me get rid of my loose tooth, I let him tie it to the playroom doorknob and slam the door. He was my older brother and I would have agreed to anything he proposed; I would have followed him anywhere. And so, one spring evening not long before I turned six, as we lay in our matching twin beds, when evening not long before I turned six, as we lay in our matching twin beds, we were going, or how far we could get in our pajamas, or what we would eat when we were going, or how far we could get in our pajamas, or what we would eat when the saltines ran out. I certainly didn’t ask my brother. Because I believed Harry could do anything, I wouldn’t have been surprised if the car had somehow started, the garage door had opened, and we’d sailed off down Village Avenue, our quiet, tree-lined street in suburban Boston, and into the sky.

In The Big House, George Howe Colt ’76 mined family memory in a bestselling portrait of a beloved summer home. Now, in Brothers: On His Brothers and Brothers in History (Scribner, $30), Colt image from smaller pieces, also won the 2011 international GAEM (Giovanni Artisti e Mosaico) Prize for experimental mosaic. “It’s important for me to illustrate that mosaic doesn’t have to be just stone and glass and cement.” Holmes says.

She can, however, work in traditional media, and made her most recent piece, Absence, from small fragments—tesserae—of marble and glass, with gold elements. Holmes installed it last October on a brick wall at the ART-PLAY Design Center, an old, now converted, factory building in Moscow. Absence is the converse of a classic mosaic portrait of a saint of the Church: the piece limns the outline of the saint’s body and haloed head—but there is no saint. The brick wall behind is all that appears in the space where we anticipate a sacred figure. “The saint is only a delineated absence,” Holmes says. “The piece asks the viewer to fill it in—according to whatever belief structure they want to use. It evokes the desire we have to fill in that space.”

To fully appreciate Absence, the viewer must see it in the context of the history of mosaic, as the artist did. Mosaic is one of the most ancient art forms, and the permanence of its traditional materials led Renaissance author Giorgio Vasari to call it “painting for eternity.” This is why “mosaics have been used by religions and empires—Christianity, Islam, the Roman Empire, Byzantium—to represent all sorts of belief systems,” Holmes explains. “[The medium] was also picked up by capitalists in New York City, by Fascists in Italy, and by Communists in Russia. Wherever there’s a strong ideology that believes itself permanent, or wants to believe itself permanent, you will see mosaics.

“But we have a society in which those empires have fallen,” she continues, “and we live amid doubt, insecurity, and impermanence. The society around us has turned away from the kind of religion that