MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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Joan Brown

Press Packet

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Pardee, Hearne. "Joan Brown." *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2023, pp. 71–72.

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The New York Times

GALLERIES

VIA MATHEW MARKS GALLERY

Joan Brown's "The Visitor" (1977) is in the show "Facts & Fantasies." at Matthew Marks.

Joan Brown

Through June 17. Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, Manhattan; 212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com.

You could call the mature style of the great American painter Joan Brown (1938-1990) extra-late Egyptian, with her figures often rendered fully frontal or fully in profile. This formality — along with expanses of startling solid colors — contributes to the hypnotic stillness of her mainly autobiographical works. (Besides painting, her interests included her family, Hinduism, ballroom dancing, serious amateur swimming and Egyptian art.) It's not always clear what Brown, who appears in six of the paintings here, is thinking about, but the seriousness is undeniable.

So it's not surprising that this show of a dozen paintings, mostly from the 1970s, includes "The Visitor" (1977). It depicts the artist seated with an Egyptian pharaoh at a restaurant. The pharaoh is deep turquoise — the color of Egyptian faience — as is the wall behind him, which is incised with hieroglyphs. If two worlds are colliding, it seems to be occurring in Brown's imagination. After all, the show is titled "Facts & Fantasies."

In "Self-Portrait at Age 42" (1980) we encounter the artist with arms folded, staring ahead. She wears a blue pullover delicately smeared with paint and a clear plastic glove. Is she facing an unwelcome interruption in her studio? Then it dawns: Her hard stare seems like the kind artists reserve for paintings in progress. There are several other alluring works, but don't miss "Donald" (1986), a copper on wood sculpture of an extra-large tabby cat. As with the Egyptians, cats were another of Brown's favorite subjects.

ROBERTA SMITH

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The New York Review of Books

‘Joan Doesn’t Give a Damn’

Regina Marler

The San Francisco painter Joan Brown snubbed success at every turn.

March 9, 2023

Estate of Joan Brown/GUC Collection

Joan Brown: *The Night Before the Alcatraz Swim*, 1975

Among the ephemera displayed in the Joan Brown retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is the wall phone that hung in her studio, its bone-colored receiver an earth-toned abstract with cadmium yellow dabs. A blue patch at the phone’s upper right corner suggests hurried snatches at the handpiece, wide of target. Friends remember Joan Brown “covered from head to toe with paint.” While still an undergraduate she found success with abstract and figurative paintings so thick with paint that their surfaces sag and ripple, betraying how wet they remained beneath the crust—for years. She slapped on color with trowels and house-painting brushes, at times almost sculpting.

Even after she abandoned impasto for the monochrome enamel surfaces of her self-portraits—the highly personal work for which she is now better known—the sensual materiality of paint remained a constant for her, as it did for other artists, including her teachers David Park and Elmer Bischoff, associated with the Bay Area Figurative Movement. Much of this texture is lost in reproduction, along with Brown’s subtle incorporations of mixed media, such as glitter. Another

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pleasure in viewing the eighty works in "Joan Brown" (the show travels next to the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh) is the shock of their scale and the vibrating intensity of their candy colors.

Over twenty-five years Brown portrayed herself dancing, swimming, painting, and traveling, interacting with men, pets, and her young son. She dons evening and wedding gowns, swimsuits, lingerie, and casual clothes, and appears many times as an animal or hybrid, clothed in fur or a pelt or wearing a mask. It says much for the feline inscrutability of Brown's expression in most of these portraits that we calmly accept the substitute of a cat's head in *The Bride* (1970). But in Brown's portraits of herself at work there is little sense of costume or performance. Despite the bright colors and quick, energetic lines Brown favors, these paint-spattered figures gaze soberly from the canvas at their maker, interpretive tools for an essentially private, searching personality. "Looking in a mirror," Brown wrote, "becoming a spectator, literally describing myself, is a very graphic way of being introspective."

Brown's mother, who had hoped for a teaching career instead of marriage and motherhood, was depressed and resentful; her father, a bank employee, drank. The family's three-room Marina District apartment offered little privacy or calm. Joan, an only child, slept in the dining room with her maternal grandmother but was often woken at night by her mother's epileptic seizures. She was shunted through Catholic girls' schools, where she felt she learned little (outside the classroom she read constantly, particularly in ancient history and cultures). "It was dark. I mean dark in the psychological way," she recalled of her childhood home. "All I wanted to do was grow up and get the hell out of there."

Estate of Joan Brown

Joan Brown: *Self-Portrait in Studio*, 1984

She drew, but had no art instruction. After graduating from high school in 1955 she visited the California School of Fine Arts (later the San Francisco Art Institute) on a whim. Dazzled by the atmosphere of freedom and energy—students painting in the hallways and playing bongos in the courtyard—she bought a pair of arty earrings and submitted a portfolio of her pencil sketches of movie stars. She started classes that fall. Although she suffered in her drawing class and planned to drop out before summer, by the next semester she had met and begun dating Bill Brown, a figurative painter and Korean War veteran who encouraged her to take a summer course with Bischoff.

Having outgrown two of the dominant schools of his day, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, Bischoff (like his peers David Parks and Richard

Estate of Joan Brown/Museum of Modern Art/Scala/Art Resource, NY

Joan Brown: *Thanksgiving Turkey*, 1959

Diebenkorn) was feeling his way into figuration, a movement Willem de Kooning had spearheaded on the East Coast when he introduced his controversial *Woman* paintings after a successful period of nonobjective gestural abstraction. For most avant-garde midcentury artists and critics in the US, representation was hopelessly passé. De Kooning's return to figuration prompted a disgusted outburst from Clement Greenberg, the apostle of the New York School: "In today's world, it's impossible to paint a face." Bischoff urged his students to work intuitively and spontaneously—in short, like Abstract Expressionists—but to notice the ordinary objects around them.

Convinced she had "no talent," Brown threw herself nevertheless into a series of exuberant paintings. She discovered she preferred large canvases. "I paint the size I do because I feel like a participant," she later said, "like I can step into the pictures. When I paint small…I'm always a spectator." She married Brown in August 1956 and the next year won second place and fifty dollars in a local juried show in which her teachers won honorable mentions. She soon featured in SFMoMA's annual exhibitions of Bay Area art, as well as in the artist-run galleries in the Fillmore, among them the Six Gallery, where Allen Ginsberg first read *Howl* in 1955.

In 1958 she moved with Bill into an apartment next door to Jay DeFeo and her husband, Wally Hedrick, in a tenement building at 2330 Fillmore Street known as Painterland: a black and white Beat Era reel of chain-smoking, bathtub beer-drinking, and constant limit-pushing. As Hedrick recalled, it "vibrated with all of these mixed personalities…the poets came over a lot and there was a lot of bongo and chanting and sort of spontaneous musical drumming." Jay and Joan grew close,

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and the two couples knocked a hole in the wall between their apartments. These were the years in which DeFeo was endlessly reworking her immense opus, eventually called *The Rose*; its deep impasto, as many as two thousand layers of mostly lead white and dark grey paint, was stiffened with wooden dowels. As she carved into its surface, DeFeo would save slices of *The Rose* to mount on black velvet and give as birthday gifts.

When George Staempfli, David Park's New York dealer, came to see DeFeo's work in 1959 at Park's suggestion, she took him through the wall to see Joan's paintings as well. He immediately bought two canvases. The next year he signed her, supplying a monthly stipend of three hundred dollars. She was the youngest artist in the Whitney's 1960 Young America exhibition (and one of five women out of thirty-six artists included). Her first New York solo show, in 1961, featured her mysterious semiabstract *Thing* paintings, blurring figure and ground. By then she had already sold *Thanksgiving Turkey* (1959), a patchy but decisive abstract, to the Museum of Modern Art. She was twenty-two. Hedrick later remarked that Joan Brown was the only artist he knew who had money; her success "seemed like a fairytale." San Francisco had no serious market for art, just a few galleries selling "clowns and landscape paintings," as the sculptor Manuel Neri put it: "if you were making money then there was something kinda wrong with your work."

After Brown's marriage broke down she moved in with Neri, a graduate student at CSFA and the director of Six Gallery. They shared a studio close to the Embarcadero and a volatile, mutually influential relationship. Brown modeled her slight, narrow-hipped body for sculptures like *Joan Brown Seated* (1959/cast 1963), shaping Neri's conception of the ideal female form. Working beside him pulled the female figure to the center of Brown's canvases. They traveled to Europe in 1961 for a four-month art tour that "knocked me out," as Brown recalled, including a Rembrandt exhibition in London and Goya and Velázquez at the Prado. Her figuration over the next two years shows a profound response to the Old Masters, echoing and borrowing from their paintings as well as paying direct homage. One of these paintings, *Flora*, was chosen for the cover of *Artforum* in July 1963. Her increasingly dramatic use of color—often in bright blocks that accentuate but fail to define body parts (the cobalt triangle on the chest of the figure in *Girl Sitting*)—owes more to Neri's influence and to the push–pull between abstraction and figuration.

Collection of Adam Lindemann/Estate of Joan Brown

Joan Brown: *Christmas Time 1970 (Joan + Noel)*, 1970

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They married in 1962, and Brown gave birth to their son that summer. Noel Elmer Neri was the inspiration for a series of painterly semiautobiographical domestic interiors in warm roses, reds, and yellows—the paint still far too thick for fine detail—along with whimsical still lifes of cookie trays. The grid emerges, along with the checkerboard, anticipating the tile strips and the carpet-like borders of her later work, one reason Brown is sometimes connected with the Pattern and Decoration movement.

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Brown's stylistic development can be roughly periodized into her four marriages, or into her three main eras of work: lush semiabstraction; flat, diary-like self-portraits; and symbolically rich late works drawing on ancient religions. And her entire career can be cleaved into before and after 1964, when on the verge of achieving a national reputation she chose to stop showing her work and experiment instead. She had lost interest in the impasto that collectors wanted from her; it was "getting monotonous," she recalled. Stunned, Staempfli released her. Brown and Neri divorced two years later, but Brown's stepdaughter Ruby Neri remembers how much her father admired Brown's indifference to the art market: "Joan doesn't give a damn."

Brown had warned Staempfli earlier that her motives were not commercial: "I would never sacrifice what I want to do and what is necessary for me to do, even if I have to collect garbage for a living." Her decision was not unprecedented in her circle. DeFeo had withdrawn from the art world in 1963 and stopped making art entirely for four years after her eviction from Painterland forced her, heartbroken, to "complete" *The Rose* in 1965.

Estate of Joan Brown/Collection of Noel Neri

Joan Brown: *Tempus Fugit*, 1970

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Estate of Joan Brown/Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Joan Brown: *Grey Cat with Madrone and Birch Trees*, 1968

Both women continued to teach. This was one of the few areas in which Brown conceded she had been held back as a woman: she had to piece together a living from small teaching gigs, often working nights and weekends, since college art departments preferred to hire male artists. After securing an assistant professorship at Berkeley in 1974, she came to regard teaching as a vocation equal to painting.

In the studio she began from scratch, trying to achieve control without losing vitality. Skeptical responses to some small still lifes didn't faze her: "I was turned on, I was excited, I didn't care." She painted a series of dreamlike animal-themed works in the late 1960s, the result of daily life drawing at the zoo and Golden Gate Park and intense identification with specific animals: the cat is to Joan Brown as the bull is to Picasso. Although these "fantasy" works, as Brown termed them, were panned when she exhibited them locally, she came to regard them as the first of her more spiritual paintings, connected with her longstanding interest in ancient symbology. They led her back to the human form, but they also prefigure the animals and cat-human hybrids throughout her later work, explorations of our dual nature: "It was always very poignant, that play between half animal and half human." The most spectacular of these hybrids, a diptych called *The Bather #5* (1982), with its sinuous odalisque foregrounded against a tiled fountain, is too large for the exhibition and hangs elsewhere at SFMoMA. The figure's placid, Ingres-inspired head rests sphinx-like on a tiger-striped body, every element of which, except the tail, merges the human with the animal. The dealer George Adams remembers Toby, one of Brown's cats, observing their conversation during a studio visit, turning his head between Adams and Brown as they spoke. When he pointed this out, she replied nonchalantly: "He knows exactly what we're talking about."

Marler, Regina. "'Joan Doesn't Give a Damn.'" *The New York Review of Books*, March 9, 2023.

Estate of Joan Brown/San Fransisco Museum of Modern Art

Joan Brown: *After the Alcatraz Swim #1*, 1975

Estate of Joan Brown/Anglim Trimble, San Francisco/Museum of Modern Art

Joan Brown: *The Bicentennial Champion*, 1976

Estate of Joan Brown/Venus Over Manhattan, New York

Joan Brown: *Woman Preparing for a Shower*, 1975

Estate of Joan Brown/Matthew Marks Gallery

Joan Brown: *Summer Solstice*, 1982

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With her third husband, Gordon Cook, a longtime friend who taught printmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute, Brown moved to a house along the Sacramento Delta. While there, she picked up a can of enamel house paint and finally achieved the flatness and color saturation she had been working toward since abandoning the troweled paintings. In a rush, the monumental self-portraits began to appear—more than eighty over the next two decades—ceaselessly processing and documenting her ideas, major life events, and relationships, often against backgrounds that included Bay Area landmarks or the downtown San Francisco skyline. These were fast, fluid paintings, although one of her most arresting from this period, *Portrait of a Girl* (1971), a self-portrait as a child against a magnificent Chinese dragon mural, shows that she could slow down to incorporate semi-legible symbols (and ideograms, in this case) from cultures that inspired her. The Mayan frieze behind the animals in *The Golden Age: The Tapir + The Jaguar* (1985) is another example, as is *The End of the Affair* (1976), not included in this show, a narrative work divided into two scenes. The left is of a solitary male figure in black, seen from behind; the rosier right half shows a couple sitting on a bed together, the male figure covered completely with hieroglyphs, an assortment of which surround his female partner on the bed like collage scraps. Intended as homages, these cultural borrowings are, Marci Kwon argues in the catalog, "reduced to totems of difference and become accessories to the story of Brown's life."

Cook introduced Brown to open-water swimming in the frigid San Francisco Bay, which led to a new series painted with even more economy, inspired by her coach Charlie Sava's critique of her swimming strokes. As a member of the all-male Dolphin Club at Aquatic Park Cove, Cook could enter the water from the clubhouse, but women had to hide their clothes and keys and swim from the beach, then build small fires afterward to warm themselves. In 1974 Brown spearheaded a

Estate of Joan Brown/Rosa Center for Contemporary Art

Joan Brown: *The Long Journey*, 1981

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successful class action lawsuit against the Dolphin Club and two other all-male water clubs at Aquatic Park.

The most moving of Brown's swim paintings record the 1975 Alcatraz swim, an annual women's event in which she almost drowned after a freighter passed among the swimmers. Brown and eight other women had to be hauled from the water into rescue boats. In each of the three numbered works that followed, Brown contained the emergency to a painting within a painting. Stoic, solitary female figures in nautical dresses sit or stand in simple interiors, their backs to a scene of chaos, choppy water, and near-death. Rich carpets under their feet reinforce the pleasures of terra firma. Brown continued to strip back volume and extraneous detail, so that in these paintings and the joyful *Dancers* series (1972–1976) her figures are reduced to deft brush drawings colored in with uniform washes or left as ghostly unfilled outlines.

These were the works that began to reengage critics and dealers, and during the 1970s they showed at SFMoMA, the Whitney, and Berkeley. (Berkeley and the Oakland Museum of California also mounted her largest retrospective to date, "Transformation: The Art of Joan Brown," in 1998.) After a trip to Italy in 1976, the *Dancers* transitioned into a quieter and more personal series exploring romance—including one of Brown's few images of herself smiling, in *The Dinner Date #2* (1973). But this was not a resting place, either. "Joan being Joan," as George Adams recalled, "she was only interested in what she was doing next."

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Cook and Brown divorced in 1976, not long after Brown took Noel on a long European tour funded by an NEA Visual Artists' Fellowship. The next year a Guggenheim Fellowship took her to Egypt. She traveled the world—Mexico, Africa, China, India—often returning to sacred sites or those of archaeological importance. She pored over theosophical texts, the popular *Seth* books by Jane Roberts, and works like Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975) that drew parallels between Western science and Eastern mysticism. At this point her studies of myth and religion found an echo in the New Age movement—a synthesis of various Eastern beliefs with the West Coast antiestablishment ethos of the late 1950s and 1960s.

What Adams calls "travel" is code for the unsettling metaphysical subject matter of Brown's later work, the temple settings and religious imagery through which she advanced her growing conviction that ancient belief systems had an underlying unity. She saw this unity expressed formally as well, remarking on the similarities in architectural styles (the ziggurat, the pyramids) and the use of line and space in two-dimensional works across disparate cultures. Her Egypt-inspired paintings were dismissed as "vapid" and "corny," but she had moved beyond aesthetic evaluations; her works were no longer about that.

In 1979 she met Mike Hebel, a city police officer and fellow seeker, at the Ananda Community House in San Francisco. They married the next year in a Hindu ceremony at SFMoMA. Joan wore a sari, as her student Bob Brokl recalled, and "was borne in on a litter. She picked the most attractive

male art students." After their first trip to India together Brown and Hebel became devotees of the guru Sathya Sai Baba. From this point on Brown held a mystical worldview, open to signs and wonders. On return visits to Sai Baba's complex in Puttaparthi, she hung on her brief moments of contact with him. She introduced Jay DeFeo to his teachings and tried to bring her to India to meet him. She came to believe that Sai Baba directed all her artistic endeavors and took on several public commissions, including three surviving tiled obelisks in San Francisco, intended to democratize her work and spread her guru's humanitarian message. These site-specific works combine animal imagery with local elements and subtle religious symbolism, as if to compare the spiritual ease of the animal world with the turmoil and material strivings of humanity. When Brown was finally granted an audience with Sai Baba in 1988, all she asked was his help in healing DeFeo, who had cancer.

In September 1990 a call came into the art department at Berkeley with the news that Brown had died in India. "We were devastated," her colleague Katherine Sherwood remembers, until "Joan called." No one ever found out who had reported her death. A month later, Brown and her two American assistants were crushed by a concrete turret that fell into the courtyard of the Eternal Heritage Museum in Puttaparthi while they were installing a thirteen-foot obelisk, her gift to Sai Baba. She was fifty-two. Some years earlier Brown was asked what kept her painting. Her reply would have made fitting last words: "To just keep growing and changing, and just keep letting go, letting go, letting go of any kind of boundaries or rules and regulations that I or anyone sets up. But what I mainly want is to be surprised. The joyousness of that surprise. Going past what you know."

"Joan Brown" is at the San Fransisco Museum of Modern Art through March 12 and will travel to the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh from May 27 to September 24, followed by the Orange County Museum of Art in Costa Mesa.

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THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Joan Brown, *After the Alcatraz Swim #1*, 1975; Collection of Maryellen and Frank Herringer, promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; © Estate of Joan Brown. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel. Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

JOAN BROWN & *IN THE SHADOW OF MT. TAM*

BY SUZANNE HUDSON

Joan Brown
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
November 19, 2022—March 12, 2023

In the Shadow of Mt. Tam
Anthony Meier, Mill Valley, California
January 31—March 17, 2023

Joan Brown's first museum exhibition was held at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA) in 1971, which makes her current retrospective there—the largest pulled together in over two decades and done so expertly by Janet Bishop and Nancy Lim—a homecoming. But in truth she never really left. Born in the Marina District, she earned her BFA and MFA at the California School of Fine Arts (later the San Francisco Art Institute), studying with mentor Elmer Bischoff. Her first gallery show, in 1957, while still an undergraduate, came at the fabled 6 Gallery, and the following year she moved to a building on Fillmore Street dubbed Painterland, where she worked alongside Jean and Bruce Conner, Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick, and Jane and Michael McClure. Increasingly visible through solo outings in San Francisco and New York, Brown likewise participated in, among others, *Young America* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1960 and the Carnegie International in 1964. By then, she had already been designated—somewhat gruesomely—"Everybody's Darling" by Philip Leider in *Artforum* in 1963. In 1964, too, she left her dealer, George Staempfli. She abandoned the slathered and incised oil surfaces that were nevertheless proving a commercial success but had also become routine.

For his part, Leider wrote, "If there is a San Francisco style, a San Francisco attitude, that style and that attitude can be found epitomized in her paintings." (He characterized it as comprising a predilection—the product of intention as well as pragmatism—for inexpensive materials, coarse surface treatments, and outsized scale.) Such critical framing has persisted, even

Hudson, Suzanne. "Joan Brown & In the Shadow of Mt. Tam." *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2023, p. 82.

as Brown traded the thick, heavily painted works from this period for simplified, frieze-like figures, rendered in vivid enamel. Their vital intensity of address remains even as the procedural signs of expressivity become superfluous. All the way through, Brown is at the center of the world of her making, observing feeling as response modulated in paint, and then as subject depicted within the frame. The exhibition tracks this course chronologically, unfurling from the first tangerine and lilac walls with nearly sculpted paintings that still look wet. Successive rooms feature still lifes and domestic scenes involving Brown's bull terrier and son and monumental tableaux of animals and more explicit if symbolic self-portraits, arriving at her spiritual questing. One especially tight grouping midway through involves Brown's daily practice of swimming; these canvases process Brown's near-death experience while attempting an open-water race from Alcatraz Island to Aquatic Park in 1975.

Mt. Tamalpais and other landmarks served as orienting beacons for Brown in the water and likewise anchor the compositions. It is here that the work sets her most explicitly against a backdrop of the city's skyline and watery shores, a contextualization within geography that redoubles that of community—of family, friends, and lovers, together with the sociability of pets—felt throughout. A related collection hang, *Bay Area Stories: Joan Brown + Friends*, productively literalizes this associational structure and insists on the relationships subtending the monographic presentation upstairs. The emphasis in this installation is on the Bay Area and its networks of affiliation through artist-run spaces, galleries, and schools. One pitch-perfect pair twins Hedrick's *Here's Art For'em* (1963) with DeFeo's *The Verónica* (1957). Both made at Painterland, they share the same elongated vertical dimensions, like flat steles flush to the wall. But the former—made after *Artforum* profiled Hedrick—flaunts a heart that could be genitals, ablaze, cleaved by a phallic rod in an altogether consumptive space, while the latter wrestles similarly coursing energies of the bullfight into something DeFeo named as seeking but also escaping grace. Cumulatively, then, *Joan Brown* and its complement insist on the artist's imbrication within the social, even after her intermittent departure from the city into adjacent sites (e.g., Snug Harbor in the Sacramento Delta in 1969). And they do so, quite profoundly, without sacrificing individual agency, but rather through suggesting that it necessarily comes into being relationally.

The situation of place is focal for *In the Shadow of Mt. Tam* at Anthony Meier, the inaugural group show christening a new space in Mill Valley. The checklist charts the neighborhood's past inhabitants—including, perhaps least surprisingly, Etel Adnan, as well as DeFeo, Gordon Onslow Ford, David Ireland, Lee Mullican, Wolfgang Paalen, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, and Rick Yoshimoto—and argues for the area as unsung nexus from the 1940s through the 1970s. The proximity to SFAI and the University of California, Davis (where Bruce Nauman, for one, went to graduate school) matters. But so, too, does the show conjure a mood of, as Michael Auping puts it in the related catalogue, citing Bill Berkson, an "on the edge of the continent mystique": focalized in springs under dense redwood canopy and a palpable dampness cut, at forest edge, by the Pacific sun. Adnan's verdant mountain-scape conjured in dynamic strokes, *Untitled* (1999), hung in the entryway, announces the formative nature of topography. But no less does Nauman and William Allan's silent film of the duo erecting a makeshift sculpture in a Muir Woods creek bed, *Span* (1966), bracket this attention to place differently. Projected to be seen from the street, it merged anew with its temporary surround as light hit the window and was overlaid, as I watched the repeating loop, with the reflection of wind-blown trees.

Back in the main gallery, a capacious but careful selection—from JB Blunk's totemic eucalyptus carving, *Presence* (1969–72), to Luchita Hurtado's diminutive glyphic crayon and ink drawing, *Green Glows the Moon* (1949), made at her dining room table—charted so many connections, formal and otherwise. It may be that this ineffable but no less real "otherwise," while often harder to reconstruct, is precisely the point.

Suzanne Hudson is an art historian and critic based in Los Angeles. Recent books include *Agnes Martin: Night Sea* (2017; 2020) and *Contemporary Painting* (2021).

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THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

JOAN BROWN

BY HEARNE PARDEE

San Francisco Museum
of Modern Art
November 19, 2022–March 12, 2023

The first major show of Joan Brown's paintings in over twenty years offers a chance to reconsider the work and legacy of this iconic Bay Area artist, who studied with Elmer Bischoff, worked in close contact with Jay DeFeo, Manuel Neri and others, and taught at UC Berkeley until her untimely accidental death in 1990. Curators Janet Bishop and Nancy Lim have assembled eighty works from her prolific output, including sculptures. In the male-dominated field of painting, Brown more than held her own with large-scale canvases, lending each of them the impact of a personal statement. Interweaving her personal life into the works with allusions to spirituality and art history, Brown's exceptional paintings still have a capacity to challenge. The show's publicity plays on her whimsical fantasy and charisma, but what emerges is a gritty dedication to painting and self-confrontation.

Encouraged by Bischoff to paint from daily life, Brown began with densely worked renderings of "things," tangible but unnameable objects that partake of the inchoate aspirations of visionary friends like Bruce Conner and Michael McClure and evoke parallel developments in New York, where Philip Guston was making thing-like abstractions in transition to figuration. Brown drew immediate critical attention in New York, after she was exhibited as part of *Young America 1960 (Thirty American Painters Under Thirty-Six)* at the Whitney Museum, and her painting *Thanksgiving Turkey* (1959) was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. Its reference to Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* (1655) reflects Brown's interest in art history, through which she filtered her daily experience, as well as her love for paint, through which she affirmed her identification with the Abstract Expressionist legacy of Bay Area figurative painters like Richard Diebenkorn and David Park.

From a full-length mirror, Brown asserted herself as a nocturnal bather and created heavily impastoed domestic scenes well before Elizabeth Murray made large-scale images of her own personal life. She endows animals with complex inner lives: *Fur Rat* (1962), a nasty amalgam of wire, nails and scraps of an old raccoon coat, an object of fear and fascination, was inspired by a dream. But Brown soon grew disillusioned by the commercialism of the gallery scene and embarked on an individual path, moving to the Sacramento Valley with her third husband, Gordon Cook, and extending her symbolic self-dramatization in a new style, informed by Henri Rousseau. She renders the open landscape of the Central Valley with flat, brightly colored enamel paints found in a local store. *The Bride* (1970), an image of Sacramento Delta abundance, features a cat bride, who holds an enormous rat on a leash; enriching her enamel paint with glitter, Brown evokes Hieronymus Bosch and Frida Kahlo with a school of multicolored fish and field of orange poppies.

Pardee, Hearne. "Joan Brown." *The Brooklyn Rail,* February 2023, pp. 71–72.

Joan Brown, *The Bride*, 1970. Oil, enamel paint, and glitter on canvas, 91 × 55 inches. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, bequest of Earl David Peugh III.

Brown didn't identify as a feminist, but dealt frankly with her position as a woman in art. Although she regularly attended figure drawing sessions, the figure remained a fraught subject for her due to her Catholic upbringing. Her figures are often animal hybrids or partially concealed, as in *Woman Wearing Mask* (1972), in which she masters her own lingerie-clad body. Masking maintains her control, and the woman's enlarged right hand emphasizes her agency: she conceals and reveals, experiencing her body from within, in resistance to glossy Pop commercialism. Hers is the internalized self-reporting of Philip Guston's late work—a project of California self-actualization, far from Cindy Sherman's elaborate disguises. Indeed, critics have commented on the inscrutable, mask-like consistency of Brown's face as depicted in unmasked self-portraits, individualized primarily by the details of backgrounds and clothing accessories.

The frontal rigidity of her portraits relates to what Brown acknowledges as a problem with perspective: it's easier for her to depict figures frontally or in profile, like those in the Egyptian wall paintings she admired. This spatial limitation heightens the challenge of self-confrontation in *Woman in Room* (1975) where, inspired by Francis Bacon, Brown treats perspective as a flat, oppressive grid. The room embodies the isolated woman's meditative intensity. Also in lingerie, she masks her face protectively behind her mirror, while casually smoking, as darkness looms outside her window.

Brown found bodily and spiritual affirmation in dancing and in open-water swimming in the San Francisco Bay. The trim, poised figure of *The Bicentennial Champion* (1976) reflects her training at the Dolphin Club she helped integrate for women, as do the cleanly defined contours of her sculptures, which, like Alex Katz's, treat figures as two-dimensional silhouettes. Inspired by Matisse's cut-outs, Brown overcomes her perspectival limitations in exuberant paintings of dancing figures that move, frieze-like, across the picture plane in *Dancers in a City #4* (1973), a fever dream set against the San Francisco skyline.

The cartoon-like style of these works, and the grotesque, caricatural faces of figures in At the Beach (1973), suggest connections to her colleague at Berkeley, Robert Colescott, but Brown doesn't pursue social satire. Rather she envisions her social mission as education through public art. Increasingly inspired by New Age philosophies, her figures fuse symbolically with animal avatars in *Harmony* (1982) and dissolve into "energy fields" based on her readings in modern physics and study with Indian guru Sai Baba. In *Summer Solstice* (1982) she merges with the night sky in a swirl of Sanskrit calligraphy. Brown planned a monument to St. Francis of Assisi in the home city that bears his name, but her accidental death in 1990—crushed by a falling balustrade at the Eternal Heritage Museum in India as she installed an obelisk dedicated to the guru—left her plans unfinished. The exhibition rounds out this truncated story with the colorful *Cat and Rat Obelisk* (1981) and late paintings in which she assumes the guise of a tiger, posed like one of Ingres's orientalizing odalisques. Brown didn't chronicle her daily life in India, and the curators reframe her involvement in exotic places with *Self-Portrait in Studio* (1984), which grounds her again at home, depicting herself in her full-length mirror in paint-splattered clothes against a wall bearing traces of recently completed canvases—in the modest, everyday painterliness of her Bay Area origins.

Hearne Pardee is an artist and writer based in New York and California, where he teaches at the University of California, Davis.

Pardee, Hearne. "Joan Brown." *The Brooklyn Rail,* February 2023, pp. 71–72.

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ARTFORUM

TRANSCENDENTAL FIGURATION

DODIE BELLAMY ON THE ART OF JOAN BROWN

Below: **Joan Brown, *Self-Portrait at Age 42*, 1980,** enamel on canvas, 71¼ × 60".

Opposite page: **Joan Brown, *Flora*, 1961,** oil on canvas, 71¼ × 72".

I LOVE A GOOD RETROSPECTIVE and its implicit narrative of salvation. I enter the gallery prepared to witness the career of some super-deserving artist plucked from the wreckage of disregard or misunderstanding. I expect to feel thrill and awe; I want to depart teary-eyed. "Joan Brown" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art did not disappoint me.

The plot of this retrospective is more compelling than most: Woman artist finds early success in a male-dominated scene but shockingly turns her back on that success. It's the story of a woman who constantly reinvents her art, who follows her gut despite what others think, and curators Janet Bishop and Nancy Lim construct it skillfully. Arranged chronologically to highlight developments in both Brown's style and inspirations, a series of interlocking rooms track the artist's engagement with family life, animals, self-portraits, swimming, ballroom dancing, travel, spirituality. The galleries are so distinct from one another that as one moves through them there is a sense of tunneling through an ever-evolving consciousness. Friends who entered the retrospective skeptical reported they came out convinced.

Bellamy, Dodie. "Transcendental Figuration." *Artforum*, February 2023, pp. 126–31.

Bellamy, Dodie. "Transcendental Figuration." *Artforum*, February 2023, pp. 126–31.

Why did Brown walk away from her triumph?

At the exhibition's opening reception, SFMoMA director Christopher Bedford stated that the retrospective signaled the institution's commitment to California artists. Born and raised in San Francisco, Brown is a quintessential *Northern* California artist. Compared with the career-churning machine of Los Angeles, the Bay Area is a place where art fame is hard to come by. This regional marginality has been a blessing as well as a curse. Historically, with no mainstream infrastructure here to lure artists and writers into behaving themselves, radical innovations have arisen along with a distrust of establishment recognition. Brown once said of her New York peers, "All they do is visit each other's studios and talk a lot of baloney about art."

It's no secret that the mid-twentieth-century art scene was not woman-friendly. It was rare for any female artist to receive attention. But Brown garnered plaudit after plaudit in the late 1950s for thick impastoed paintings that wobble between abstract and figurative modes—a style reflective of the Bay Area Figurative aesthetics promoted at the California School of Fine Arts (later the San Francisco Art Institute), where she received her BFA and MFA. In 1960, at the age of twenty-two, Brown became the youngest artist in the "Young America" exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, which led to her work being collected by the Museum of Modern Art, and had a solo show at New York's Staempfli Gallery. Yet within a few years, she not only withdrew from the mainstream art scene but also began to create work that was at odds with just about every art trend. This resulted in her losing gallery

Bellamy, Dodie. "Transcendental Figuration." *Artforum,* February 2023, pp. 126–31.

Opposite page: **View of "Joan Brown," 2022–23**, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Foreground: *Divers*, 1974. Walls, from left: *The Night Before the Alcatraz Swim*, 1975; *After the Alcatraz Swim #3*, 1976; *After the Alcatraz Swim #1*, 1975. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel. Left: **Joan Brown, *Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat*, 1970**, oil enamel on fiberboard, 96 × 48". Above: **Joan Brown, *Thanksgiving Turkey*, 1959**, oil on canvas, 47⅛ × 47⅛".

representation and the monthly stipend that came with it.

So why did Brown walk away from her triumph? Her teacher Elmer Bischoff is credited with encouraging her to cast off received values and follow her intuition. But there has to have been more to it than that. Brown's friend and (in the late '50s) next-door neighbor Jay DeFeo also turned her back on career opportunities. For eight years, DeFeo obsessively piled toxic paint onto her *Guinness Book of Records*–worthy one-ton painting *The Rose*, 1958–66, which was only exhibited twice during her lifetime. When curators requested work from her, she'd say she was too busy. I imagine both Brown and DeFeo were impacted by the regional skepticism toward the mainstream. Even I, who moved to San Francisco in the late '70s, am conflicted about the notion of commercial success, seeing it as somehow impure. But, again, there has to have been more to it than that.

I was determined to understand, so I reached back in time and read the piece that put Brown on the map—"Joan Brown: Everybody's Darling" by Philip Leider, founding editor of *Artforum*. Published in the magazine's June 1963 issue,

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The Bride becomes a nightmare of alienation, of unconscious drives that refuse to remain hidden. The goofiness of the painting destabilizes the viewer and puts Brown in control.

which sports Brown's *Flora*, 1961, on its cover (where it was printed incorrectly, with the left-right orientation reversed), the article is eye-opening in its attitude toward women creators. Though Leider practically foams at the mouth over Brown's greatness, his praise centers on her position as a perfect receptacle of the "rich mood (and mode) that has been developing in San Francisco over the past decade." He discusses the men who shaped that mode, opining, "What is important is that what she inherited she did not adulterate, and that what she brings to her inheritance is a strong and considerable talent." In other words, he lauds her for her lack of innovation. He further credits Brown with abandoning the "sign," for hating art as decoration, and for favoring "a surface of tough, moody, coarse, and even ugly paint in muted colors." In the following decade, Brown went on to embrace symbolism, decorative elements, and brilliantly colored flat surfaces. It's as if she was creating a dark mirror that reflected back at Leider the very traits he disparaged.

Leider's article was published a mere four months after Sylvia Plath's suicide. In my fantasy alternate universe, Plath holds out a few more years and feminism saves her. Though Brown came of age as an artist at the dawn of second-wave feminism, she never embraced it. Her work shares many second-wave concerns—personal narrative, self-identity, the body, love, relationships, the domestic—but she put her personal spin on everything. Rather than critiquing domesticity like, say, Tillie Olsen did, Brown embraced it as subject matter, focusing on pets, objects in her home and studio, and her son, Noel. Noel, who was named after Christmas because Brown loved holidays, said she was a really good mother. She enjoyed cooking and would make meals for a local shelter. She also carried sandwiches in her

Bellamy, Dodie. "Transcendental Figuration." *Artforum,* February 2023, pp. 126–31.

Opposite page: **Joan Brown**, ***The Bride***, **1970**, oil, enamel, and glitter on canvas, 91 × 55". Above: **Joan Brown**, ***A New Age: The Bolti Fish***, **1984**, enamel on canvas, 72 × 120".

pockets to hand out to unhoused people. Intense and passionate, she continually threw herself into new interests. She was married four times, traveled extensively, and swam competitively without a wet suit in the frigid San Francisco Bay. In 1974, she joined the faculty of the art-practice department at the University of California, Berkeley, where former students say she was a dedicated teacher. Through all this, she produced an enormous amount of work, and though she diverged from her early art-star trajectory, she regularly exhibited in solo and group shows. Some see Brown as a role model for later generations of female artists, but her work has not featured prominently in surveys of feminist art.

The SFMoMA show, which contains some eighty paintings and sculptures in total, is full of self-portraits (Brown created more than one hundred during her lifetime), but the woman who peers out from canvas after canvas remains a mystery, as do the private symbols that repeat, sometimes in the background, sometimes (as with the enormous fish she holds in the 1970 *Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat*) front and center. Interpretations of Brown's symbolism can feel far-fetched or inadequate. Knowing the artist was raised in San Francisco's Marina District does little to solve the puzzle of all those fish in her paintings. Some of her contemporaries turn to astrology for clues. Brown was an Aquarian—thus the water and fish. In the Chinese zodiac, she was born on the cusp of the Ox and the Tiger—thus the tigers. Following this thread, I was excited to learn that her painting *Thanksgiving Turkey*, 1959, was a restaging of Rembrandt's *The Slaughtered Ox*, 1655. Cusp of the Ox!

Brown's use of animals in her art was influenced by the dogs in Renaissance court paintings—the way they seem to have an existence of their own outside the human drama in which they're embedded. She was fascinated with the psychic connections between animal and human nature, and she was not afraid to be cartoony and even a bit goofy while exploring those links. In *The Bride*, 1970, she fills an aqua sky with a school of

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fish. In the foreground, standing in the midst of a complicated field of poppies, the bride in her white gown has not a woman's head but a cat's. Her hands are hidden behind a bouquet, and draped over her right wrist is a ribbon leash attached to a very large rat. The image looks more like an illustration from a children's book than high art. The cat-headed woman stares at the viewer. It's difficult to determine whether she's feeling confrontational or trapped. The blushing pink cleavage that spills out of her bodice is the only element that suggests this figure is truly human. The pinkness is reflected in the fish, the poppies, the bouquet, and even the rat's leash. The more I look at it, the more vulnerable and distressing that patch of flesh becomes. So *The Bride* for me becomes a nightmare of alienation, of unconscious drives that refuse to remain hidden. The goofiness of the painting destabilizes the viewer and puts Brown in control. It is a powerful strategy.

In more conventional self-portraits, where Brown portrays herself as woman rather than animal, she peers back blankly at the viewer, revealing little. She often looks caught or unwilling, as in a mug shot. As they do in *The Bride*, backgrounds and symbols as stand-ins for the self provide meaning and emotional impact. When I look closely at the facial expressions, I see hints of terror, awe, of being stunned, like when you catch yourself in the mirror and have that uncanny *Who is that?* moment.

In her "After the Alcatraz Swim" series, 1975–76, which focuses on the aftermath of trauma, Brown's use of displacement is more overt. In 1975, while the artist was on a long-distance group swim to Alcatraz, a steamer sailed too close and Brown almost drowned. In the paintings, her avatars gaze to the side, lost in thought, totally unaware of the viewer's existence. They appear numb, but evidence of Brown's brush with death pops up everywhere. Through windows, the steamer floats ominously in the bay. In paintings depicted behind Brown, swimmers are being swallowed by churning waves. In one image, Brown wears a blue gown decorated with an anchor. In another, her blue dress is patterned with steamships, like an endlessly repeating flashback.

The profound impact of Brown's confrontation with mortality is felt throughout the galleries that follow the one showcasing "Alcatraz Swim." The impermanence of life looms large. Even in her exuberant ballroom-dancing canvases, the male partner is sometimes transparent or a skeleton. Toward the end of her life, Brown devoted herself to New Age spirituality. She was inspired by Fritjof Capra's *Tao of Physics* and by the books of Jane Roberts, oracle of the discarnate entity Seth. In 1981, she became a devotee of controversial guru Sathya Sai Baba and dedicated her art to being a channel for his teachings. In work from that period, figures divorced from time and space move through color fields that represent the limitless cosmos. In effervescent patterns of light, the figures morph into energy fields. All this sounds pretty hopeless, but some of the most stunning works in the show hail from this chapter. I kept thinking in awe, *How did she pull this off?* It's a feat comparable to T. S. Eliot's wrenching from the bowels of Anglo-Catholicism the breathtaking *Four Quartets*.

The painting I cannot quit thinking about is the monumental *A New Age: The Bolti Fish*, 1984. In the midst of a featureless blue six-by-ten-foot background floats a giant fish that shimmers with vivid multicolored dabs of enamel. The painting is patterned after a postcard found in Brown's papers—*Jonah and the Whale*, a folio from the *Jami' al-tavarikh*, or "Compendium of Chronicles," ca. 1400. Here Brown replaces the whale with a fish drawn from Egyptian iconography. The bolti fish, or tilapia, common in the Nile, hatches its eggs in its mouth and is thus a symbol for regeneration and rebirth. Inside its gaping jaws stands a tiny Joan Brown wearing the paint-spattered clothes featured in many of her portraits and holding a paintbrush. She is both creating and engulfed by her art, hovering through vastness. The ecstasy of Brown's late work is contagious, wiping out my ability to respond to it on anything but an emotional level. I left the exhibit excited and really, really happy. I know that's cheesy, but Brown has convinced me that cheesiness is a rich terrain.□

"Joan Brown" is on view through Mar. 12 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; travels to the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, May 27–Sept. 24; Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa, CA, Feb. 7–May 1, 2024.

Dodie Bellamy is a writer who lives in San Francisco.

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BOOKS & ARTS | ART REVIEW

'Joan Brown' Review: California Painting

A retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art tracks the Bay Area artist's shifting style, from her thickly painted early works to the flat, insouciant aesthetic for which she is best known

By Peter Plagens

Dec. 28, 2022 4:54 pm ET

Installation view of 'Joan Brown' PHOTO: KATHERINE DU TIEL/SFMOMA

In 1959, the prominent New York art dealer George Staempfli visited the studio of Joan Brown, a 21-year-old California Bay Area artist whose style at the time was one of thickly painted, darkly colorful but barely discernible figurative images (such as "Thanksgiving Turkey," 1959). He immediately bought two of her paintings and, not long thereafter, purchased half a dozen more,

inviting her to show in his new gallery space. With the proceeds, Brown and her then-husband, the artist Manuel Neri, embarked on a grand tour of Europe.

Joan Brown

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Through March 12, 2023

Brown likely could have gone on painting commercially successful works in the same vein (one graced the cover of the influential Artforum magazine in 1963). Despite the monthly stipend at stake she couldn't bring herself to do it. In late 1964, she told Staempfli that her work was "getting out of control in terms of the

Joan Brown's 'Thanksgiving Turkey' (1959) PHOTO: ESTATE OF JOAN BROWN/MOMA, N.Y./ARS, N.Y.

Plagens, Peter. "'Joan Brown' Review: California Painting." *The Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2022.

heavy paint," and she left the gallery shortly thereafter. What followed in her studio was the flat, insouciant style for which she is most known and which provides the gravitational center of her satisfying retrospective—simply titled "Joan Brown"—at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (through March 12, 2023). Curated by the museum's Janet Bishop and Nancy Lim, it contains 80 works, including five whimsical, funky cardboard sculptures.

Brown was born in San Francisco in 1938, and went to art school at what later became the San Francisco Art Institute, graduating in 1960. One of her teachers, the painter Elmer Bischoff, remarked that she was either "a genius or very simple."

A work from this early period, "Girl Standing / Girl With Red Nose" (1962) is a typical, lushly impastoed painting, created when a few Bay Area artists made their own paint with linseed oil and pigments whirred together in a blender. It dried like greasy frosting. The girl in "Girl Standing" is a somewhat bewildered-looking young woman with a large red nose, wide catlike eyes, and the smallish breasts and ample stomach of an early Flemish Madonna. She seems almost secondary, however, to the thick paint itself—red and brown in the background, and light tan with a tiny greenish tinge for the figure's flesh. A shadow over her left shoulder and upper arm is the same

Joan Brown's 'Grey Cat With Madrone and Birch Trees' (1968) PHOTO: ESTATE OF JOAN BROWN/MFA, BOSTON

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blood red as in the background. Spelled out like this in words, the scheme makes no sense; on the wall, however, the painting's combination of friendly figuration and no-holds-barred paint application explains Brown's early success with collectors.

From that point, Brown's life seemed to contain the same kind of contrast as her paintings. In 1973 she received the Art Institute's Adaline Kent award (a very big deal in San Francisco); a year later Brown was granted tenure at the University of California, Berkeley, and in 1977 she received a Guggenheim fellowship. The critic Marcia Tucker included her in a bellwether (and somewhat ironically titled) exhibition, "'Bad' Painting" in New York. Brown's mother, however, died by suicide in 1969. Brown herself—a dedicated swimmer—nearly drowned trying to swim from Alcatraz Island to the mainland in 1975.

Through all of this, painting was her deep rudder. She came out of a self-imposed Coventry in 1967 with an exhibition at the Hansen Gallery of animal paintings that puzzled her audience. Brown's new paint-handling was flatter, the compositions more crisp, and the imagery bordering on cartoonish. One work in her new style is "Grey Cat With Madrone and Birch Trees" (1968). It is one of the best paintings in the exhibition, and showcases Brown's matchless mix of surreal mood (the hot orange-and-brown landscape seems not of this Earth, while the cat stares at the viewer like an underpaid doorman) and almost comic matter-of-factness. Brown's pictorial master stroke, though, is adding two slender trunks of birch trees, slightly behind the cat, that loom like scepters of feline authority. The similarly composed "Grey Wolf With Red Clouds and Dark Tree" (1968) is almost as wonderful.

Joan Brown's 'The Night Before the Alcatraz Swim' (1975) PHOTO: ESTATE OF JOAN BROWN

From there until about 1980, Brown skips and glides through self-portraits (never over-flattering but certainly not merciless). There are also pictorial accounts of her adventures in ballroom dancing and that near-disaster swimming in the Bay. As the exhibition's catalog puts it, Brown's work contains "fantasy and the absurd

. . . which would become essential components of Brown's mature painting [and] were amply encouraged by a Bay Area context that eschewed the relative self-seriousness of New York."

In 1979, Brown began going to the Ananda Community House of the Self-Realization Fellowship. A year later she met Sathya Sai Baba, an Indian guru, and became a devotee. Brown died in India in 1990 when she and two others were killed by a collapsing turret in a temple devoted to the guru. She was installing an obelisk she'd made to honor him. Brown's last period of very flat and very bright paintings arising from her new spirituality may not be the equal of the earlier work, but this generous exhibition clearly demonstrates that she was one of the Bay Area's best painters.

–Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in Connecticut.

Plagens, Peter. "'Joan Brown' Review: California Painting." *The Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2022.

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DATEBOOK
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

ART & EXHIBITS

San Francisco artist Joan Brown comes home in compelling retrospective at SFMOMA

Tony Bravo November 19, 2022 Updated: November 20, 2022, 11:17 am

Joan Brown, "The Night Before the Alcatraz Swim," 1975.
Photo: Estate of Joan Brown

For a few seconds, the pleasurable cold of San Francisco Bay gripped me while viewing the Joan Brown retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Bravo, Tony. "San Francisco Artist Joan Brown Comes Home in Compelling Retrospective at SFMOMA." *San Francisco Chronicle Datebook*, November 19, 2022.

After works that show the San Francisco artist's evolution from abstraction in the late 1950s and early '60s to the bold, fantastical figurative style that would define her until her death in 1990 at age 52, you're suddenly plunged in the water.

Not literally, of course, but walking into the gallery devoted to Brown's swim-related works is just as affecting. The paintings collected here each tell a story about Brown, including her swim lessons with Hall of Fame coach Charlie Sava, her win in a 1976 swimming championship and a near-death experience during a race from Alcatraz to Aquatic Park in 1975.

Joan Brown, "Christmas Time 1970 (Joan + Noel)," 1970.
Photo: Estate of Joan Brown

Suspended in the center of the gallery is the 1974 sheet metal and wood sculpture "Divers," depicting from above and below a female figure breaking through the water, and a second woman mid-swim. You can easily spend minutes with each of Brown's works throughout the exhibition absorbing their stories, due to the thorough texts by curators Janet Bishop and Nancy Lim and also because of how deeply personal each painting and sculpture is.

"She was an incredible storyteller," said Lim. "That's something we try to emphasize in the way that we organized each of the galleries and how the galleries string together. ... This impulse that she had to share all that happens to her is part of what makes (her work) such a rich viewing experience."

Bishop and Lim's riveting exhibition demonstrates Brown's storytelling skill, with many of those stories centered in San Francisco. The artist was a native of the city and spent decades painting and presenting work in Northern California. A graduate of the California School of Fine Arts (later the now-closed San Francisco Art Institute), she

Bravo, Tony. "San Francisco Artist Joan Brown Comes Home in Compelling Retrospective at SFMOMA." *San Francisco Chronicle Datebook*, November 19, 2022.

Joan Brown, "Gordon, Joan + Rufus in Front of S.F. Opera House," 1969.
Photo: Estate of Joan Brown

also had a long relationship with SFMOMA. The more than 80 works on view make this the most significant re-evaluation of the artist in two decades.

Brown's origins in abstraction lay an interesting foundation for what was to come. You see figures emerge throughout her paintings with works like "Girl in the Surf With the Moon Casting a Shadow" from 1962 and "Noel's First Christmas" (depicting her son) offering an enticing preview of what will fully flower. These works are especially interesting when considered with the companion show "Joan Brown and Friends" on the second floor, which better contextualizes some of the layering techniques and blown-out shapes Brown explored in this period, a la Beat artist Jay DeFeo.

By the late 1960s, Brown's vivid, cartoon-like style of figuration is fully formed. "Grey Cat with Madrone and Birch Trees" from 1968 is a signature animal painting for the artist (she revisits

animals often) showing the feline against an orange sky with fog rolling in behind. “Gordon, Joan + Rufus in Front of S.F. Opera House,” a self-portrait from 1969 with her third husband, Gordon Cook, and their dog, introduces Brown as her own subject.

Beyond the swim series, works like “Christmas Time 1970 Joan + Noel,” showing Brown against changing leaves, her young son clad in a San Francisco Giants cap, and her depiction of herself as a child in “Portrait of a Girl” with a young Brown shown against a glittering Chinatown dragon, also strongly convey that idiosyncratic attention to story. Her paintings in the later “Journey” series depict Brown’s relationship with Modesto Lanzone, a San Francisco restaurateur with whom she traveled to Italy. The paintings show the two in transit, dancing and kissing, and feel as intimate as diary pages.

“There was such a seamlessness between her art and her life,” said Bishop. “Whatever she was passionate about would show up in her in her paintings; it’s one of the things that really distinguishes her. There’s a kind of fearlessness in her subject matter. They might even be seen as corny, and yet she didn’t hold back.”

Joan Brown, “Grey Cat with Madrone and Birch Trees,” 1968.
Photo: Estate of Joan Brown

Bravo, Tony. “San Francisco Artist Joan Brown Comes Home in Compelling Retrospective at SFMOMA.” *San Francisco Chronicle Datebook*, November 19, 2022.

Joan Brown, "Harmony," 1982.
Photo: Estate of Joan Brown

By the time you reach the final works done before her death in the collapse of an ashram in Puttaparthi, India, in 1990, you feel as though you've experienced a series of vignettes. Works like the "Bather" series (don't miss the "Bather" on the third floor near the museum's Steps Coffee), which shows her as versions of human-feline hybrids, her "St. Francis + St. Claire" from 1989 and her columned triptych "Ganesha, the Lesson, Hanuman" from 1981 all feel serene while sacrificing none of joy of her earlier work.

Appropriately, the last piece you see before exit is Brown's 1981 "Cat and Rat Obelisk," which combines the artist's spiritual searching with the unexpected humor that makes her work so rewarding on repeat viewings.

"Joan Brown": 1-8 p.m. Thursday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Monday. Saturday, Nov. 19-March 12. $19-$25. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000.

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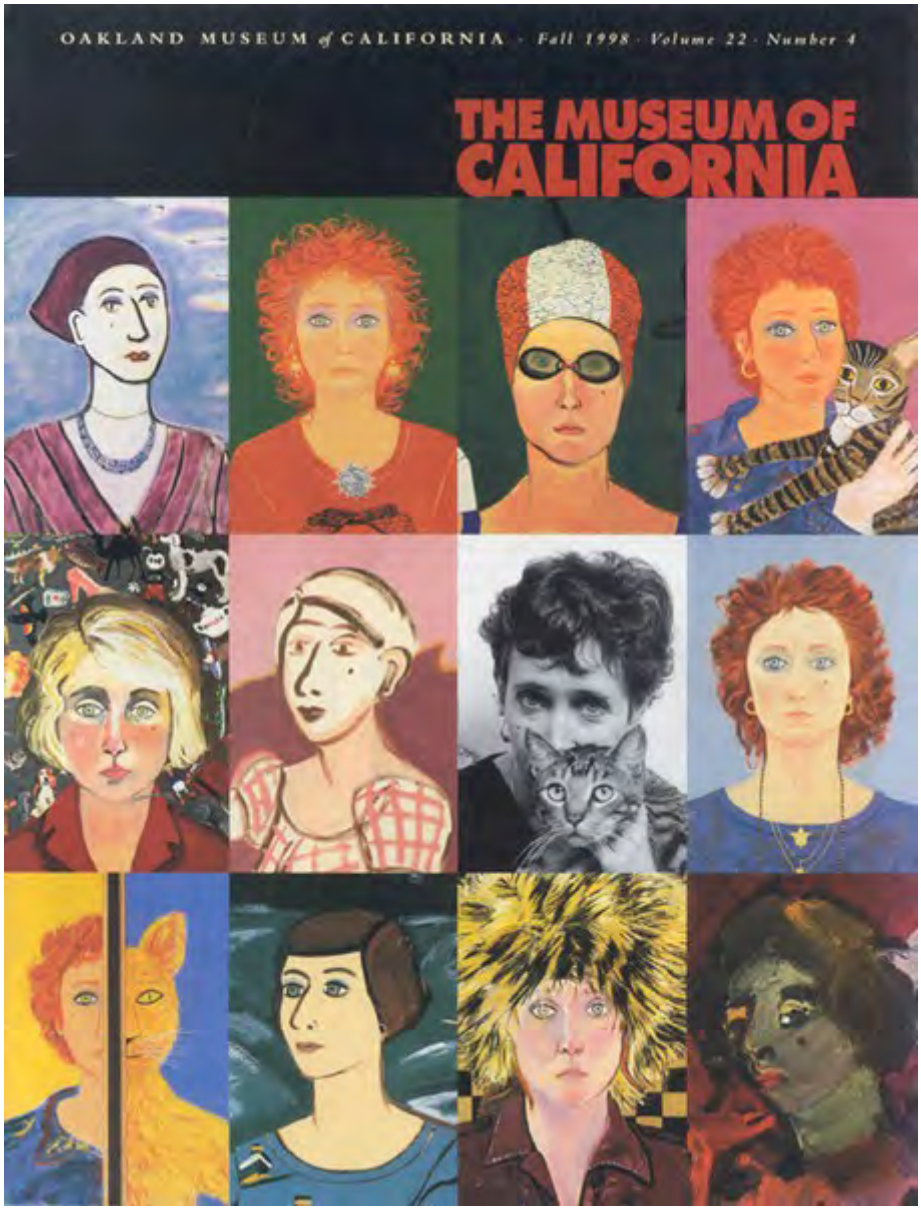
Into the Light: The Transformation of Joan Brown (1998)



Cover of *The Museum of California* magazine, Fall 1998, showing details of Joan Brown self-portraits spanning her 35 year career. In center right, detail of a photograph of the artist by M. Lee Fatherree.

Wasserman, Abby. "Into the Light: The Transformation of Joan Brown (1998)." *The Museum of California Magazine*, August 29, 2019.

Into the Light: The Transformation of Joan Brown (1998)

by Abby Wasserman

Perhaps the best time to die is when one is walking in a state of grace. Those moments are rare, often fleeting, but when they do occur, glorious. The painter Joan Brown died in an accident in India at such a moment of grace, when she was happy, at peace, and doing what she wanted to do--installing an obelisk of her design at the ashram of her Indian spiritual guru.

Yet she was only 52, vitally alive, and the accident was freakish: a turret in the ashram's new museum, then under construction, fell on her and her two American assistants as they worked. She could have left the installation to others but was determined to do it herself. This was entirely characteristic.

The accident affected the lives of three families and many friends and cut short an extraordinary career. The exhibition *Transformation: The Art of Joan Brown*, co-organized by the Oakland Museum of California and the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, shows the breadth and quality of Joan Brown's accomplishments. One hundred and twenty-six of her paintings and sculptures are featured. Seeing them, one comes to know her, for Joan Brown's work is largely autobiographical, a "visual diary" reflecting events of her life, people she loved, and things in which she delighted. Above all, they trace her lifelong quest for personal identity and spiritual understanding, and the evolution of her style.

The emotive, unbridled energy of early paintings evolved into an increasing emotional detachment--built-up surfaces flattened out and forms became more precise and decorative. But some attributes stayed constant: her brilliant use of color and the presence of the figure. She came out of art school able to synthesize the figurative and the abstract, but it was the figurative that commanded her interest and dominated her art.

Because her work is often distilled to essentials, her "visual diary" might at first appear easy to read, but there is much hidden under the surface. Brown, after all is said and done, has written in a code known only to her.

Oakland Museum Senior Curator Karen Tsujimoto, co-curator of the exhibition, delves deeply into Brown's life and work in her excellent essay in the book accompanying the exhibition. A second intriguing essay, by her co-curator Jacquelynn Baas, director of the U.C. Berkeley Art Museum, examines symbolism in Brown's work.

Feisty and driven, with a great zest for life, Joan Brown determined to do it all--be an artist, have a career, be a wife and mother. She married four times. Three of her husbands were artists--Bill H. Brown, whose name she kept, Manuel Neri and Gordon Cook. Her fourth husband, Michael Hebel, a lawyer and police officer, shared her spiritual interests and love of travel. Full of contradictions, Brown was direct and open but also hidden and controlled.

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Her friend Wally Hedrick believes she was two people. "There was the innocent child, sort of flowing through time, and there was the mature artist, and they just happened to be in the same body at different times." Although small and slight, she swam long distance races in San Francisco Bay. She was a fighter for rights of women without calling herself a feminist. Raised in a troubled family with limited cultural interest, she became a world traveler, embracing the history and cultures of Italy, Mexico, China, Egypt, India--yet living all but three years of her life in San Francisco, her home town. Her vision of possibilities deepened as the years passed.

She was born Joan Vivien Beatty in 1938. Her childhood was a study in chiaroscuro. Raised in the open spaces and brilliant light of San Francisco's Marina, she shared a small rather dark apartment with her parents and maternal grandmother, and never had a room of her own. Her grandmother was unwell; her father, whom she adored, drank heavily each night; and her mother occasionally threatened to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge.

Creating her own world, Brown played with an elaborate dollhouse and made paper dolls, imagining interesting lives for them. The only thing she recalled enjoying with her mother, she told Paul Karlstrom of the Archives of California Art, was dining out at elegant restaurants. Her mother disliked cooking anything but desserts, and sometimes made three for a single meal.

As a child Brown felt no inclination to be an artist. She was an indifferent student but frequented the public library, reading as many as 15 books a week, many on ancient civilizations. As a teenager she spent time after school shopping with her liberal clothes allowance, working to earn her own money, and swimming at Aquatic Park. She liked to draw pictures from movie magazines of film stars like Betty Grable and Arlene Dahl, and vaguely imagined a career in business or fashion. The film star drawings were her portfolio when she applied to art school.

She was set to matriculate at a Catholic women's college when she saw an ad for the California School of Fine Arts. She hiked up Russian Hill to the school and changed the course of her life--it was that simple. CSFA, which later became the San Francisco Art Institute, was different than any atmosphere she had known, and she loved it. Students wearing sandals played bongos in the courtyard, and there were the smells of paint and freedom in the air.

In the late 1950s the two dominant painting styles at CSFA were the "fig" and the "creepy crawly," slang for "figurative" and "abstract." Elmer Bischoff was the leading exponent of the figurative, Frank Lobdell the leading abstractionist. Brown started with design courses but did poorly and almost withdrew. But she had fallen for a handsome painter, Bill Brown, and stuck around to take a landscape painting course in the summer. The course was taught by Bischoff, who saw potential in her work and that gave her confidence to continue. She

never looked back; and it was never easy. “It’s like pulling teeth a portion of the time, I have to totally pull stuff out,” she told Paul Karlstrom. “So I worked like hell that first year, just went on hundred percent into it.”

There is a big oil by Brown from 1959 called “Fussing Around by the Light of the Moon.” Painted with her sure, energetic hand, it features a couple of abstract objects floating in a seaweed-colored sky. They could be an origami rooster and a wrapped stone. “Fussing Around” is an abstract longing to be figurative. Brown was only 20 when she painted it, and it’s so amusing, charming and devil-may-care that it makes one smile. At the same time, it’s masterfully controlled, like the taut engineering under the lid of a piano.

“She knew exactly what she was going to do--make art--and nobody was going to stand in her way,” sculptor Manuel Neri recalls about Brown, who he would marry a few years later. Part of her intent was academic; she liked the atmosphere at CSFA and stayed to earn B.A. and M.A. degrees and teach classes. Later she joined the art faculty at the University of California, Berkeley, where she was a tenured professor. She believed that everyone is creative.

“She would always say that anyone could do what she was doing if they had the will, the focus and the intent, and were willing to bring out the richness of their inner life,” Mike Hebel says. “No one may like it, you may not like it yourself, but it’s your work, and if you’re going to be an artist, you have to be committed to your work whether anybody likes it.”

“The first time I heard about Joan,” Wally Hedrick told me, “Elmer Bischoff said to me, ‘I have this extraordinary student. She’s either a genius or very simple.’”

Portrait of Lupe by Joan Brown

Her simplicity was fearlessness and disarming directness; her genius was to absorb everything, synthesize disparate styles and create one for herself that was unique and personal. The principles that Bischoff taught his students and which informed Brown’s life as an artist were to work hard, “follow your nose,” respect the validity of your own imagery, take chances, and accept the struggle of the creative process regardless of rewards.

“Elmer was able to talk to you very deeply about painting, which I think is very mysterious,” Bischoff’s wife, painter Adelie Landis, says. “I don’t know many people who can do that today. He would pick up in the painting what you were trying to do and weren’t able to express, and where you should go. And for an artist, that’s a road ticket to freedom and realization. It was like, whoa!”

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The art school was at the center of a creative, free-wheeling group of men and women who worked and partied hard. Manuel Neri says the art market at that time was so depressed in San Francisco that no one expected to sell, and this allowed them to enjoy the freedom to go where "their noses" led them. The first place Joan Brown showed outside SFAI was the 6 Gallery, started by a group from the school that included Wally Hedrick. The 6 was where Allen Ginsberg gave the first reading of his poem *Howl*, signaling the start of the Beat era.

Hedrick and his wife, Jay DeFeo, lived next door to the Browns on Fillmore Street. The couples were so intimate that they punched a big hole in the wall so they could step into each other's studios. DeFeo and Brown enjoyed a lively rapport. A few years older, DeFeo had known from an early age that she would be a painter, and she had a lot to teach Brown. In the Fillmore apartment, DeFeo created her tour de force, "The Rose," now owned by the Whitney Museum of American Art. New York dealer George Staempfli stepped through the hole between the studios and bought paintings by Joan Brown, the first she'd sold, and let her fill in the amount on the check.

Brown was insatiable in her appetite for learning, Hedrick recalls. "She would call me up in the middle of the night and say, 'What is this stuff that Leonardo discovered?' I'd say, 'What do you mean, what are you talking about?' She'd say, 'Perspective.'

"'Well, Joan, perspective is how the camera sees.' I'd try to give her a simple answer and she'd demand"--his eyebrows shoot up--"she'd demand, 'You've got to come over tomorrow and teach me perspective.' Well, I mean--to me, perspective is so obvious, why do I have to teach anybody? Well, for Joan it was not obvious. She saw things flat. I mean the idea of things getting smaller as they go away had never occurred to her."

In the 1970s, adopting her preferred way of seeing, Brown would paint flat planes in which the play of shapes, light and color, not perspective, dominated. Many of these paintings call to mind the cut-paper work Matisse did in the late 1940s: celebrations of pure color and playful inventiveness of shape.

Less than two years after entering CSFA, she was showing in galleries in the Bay Area and Staempfli gave her a two-person New York show. She was 22. This brought media attention, more shows, more success, and for awhile it all went to her head.

"Early on, when I met her, she was like a young--if a rooster can be female, she was like a rooster," Adelie Landis says.

There was high, fast living for a few years, but then she settled down, because work, not fame and fortune, was the most important thing to her.

"Most artists, after they get out of the protection of the school, have real difficulty in

sustaining even a tremendous talent," says Wanda Hansen, who with Diana Fuller was Brown's San Francisco dealer for years. "You have to have a discipline and a commitment that excludes everything else. Art is your primary purpose in life. She had that. She had the formula that makes a great creative artist. Integrity with the work, dedication, an obsessiveness. She had tremendous stamina and could just focus." Fellow artists recognized this, encouraging her and speaking enthusiastically and generously about her work.

Joan and Bill Brown were married only a few years but remained friends until her death. Her next marriage, to Manuel Neri, lasted four years and produced Brown's only child, Noel. She was not going to repeat her parents' stoicism in the face of unhappiness. Manuel Neri says the only time they got along was in the studio, where they shared extraordinary rapport and trust.

Karen Tsujimoto writes about the synergy between them; artistic synergy seems to have been an essential element in Brown's first three marriages.

Brown featured her husband in paintings, including "Family Portrait" (1960), which is a picture of a sober (very sober) conventional couple, something they were not in real life, sitting with their dog. Brown liked this painting and considered it her most personal at the time; still, she sold it through Staempfli. The woman in the portrait looks less like the gamine she was in her youth than her mother. Bob, the handsome bull terrier who appears in "Family Portrait," became unpredictable, biting Neri "once weekly" and in a terrible incident, attacking and killing the dog next door. "It was like having a mean child," Neri says, indulgent even now.

A different view of a relationship surfaces in "The Day Before the Wedding" (1962), in which a naked woman appears in fearful flight from some dark fate. "The Bride" (1970) imparts yet another take on marriage. Painted while Brown was married to Gordon Cook, it depicts a cat "bride" in a white frock standing erect and proud, holding a bouquet in one paw and a leash in the other, with a huge rat on the end of it. Colored fish swim across a watery blue sky. The ground blooms with poppies. Brown loved dogs and cats equally, but cats symbolize the feminine, indeed Brown herself, in many of her paintings. In "The Bride," the upright, ladylike cat clearly keeps the lurking rat (the groom?) in place. There are plenty of fish in the sea and it's springtime under her feet. "The Bride" exudes well-being and pride in the ability to keep emotions (and marriages) under control.

The most important male in Joan Brown's life was her son, Noel. She once confided to Wanda Hansen, "I'm crazy about him." She painted at home to be near him, and painted him in many settings--the kitchen, on his first pony ride, dressed in a Halloween costume.

Now 36, Noel Neri lives on the east coast and is a sculptor. He has Frida Kahlo eyebrows and a quiet, warm, self-contained manner. He remembers the costume his mother made when he was two, immortalized in "Noel on Halloween" (c. 1964): his friend, the son of

Bruce and Jean Conner, also had a homemade costume that Halloween. "I was dressed as a tiger and he was dressed as a lion," Noel recalls. "His mother could sew really well. It was a beautiful lion with a huge mane and his face stuck out. It was a pretty wonderful costume. And mine was really funky. It was more an object of art than it was a Halloween costume. I think that's why she had a lot of fun doing it." "Noel on Halloween" depicts the little boy in a costume more spotted jaguar than tiger, with whiskers painted on his face. Surrounded by thick red paint, with a white bird in his hand, the child is the picture of sturdy innocence. Brown's paintings of Noel are tender and happy, as though she is experiencing childhood's magic with him. She encouraged his artistic tendencies, pinning up his pictures in her studio. He says she always asked him what he thought of her paintings and listened happily to his comments.

During her marriage to Gordon Cook, Brown continued to paint prolifically, including lively, often mysterious images of lovers, dancers and swimmers. The couple loved dancing and distance swimming in San Francisco Bay. It was an odd pairing: she was outgoing and optimistic, he was introverted and critical and, according to friends, sometimes cutting toward her in public.

But the marriage lasted a decade, and Adelie Landis saw a softness surface in Brown that she hadn't seen before. She lost some of her edge, Landis says, and became warmer, less distant, which may have reflected a warming generally towards other women. Her hostile, depressed mother had committed suicide in 1969, and Brown felt literally able to breathe easier, she told Karlstrom, as though a weight had been lifted from her.

Brown's paintings from the years of her marriage to Cook are disciplined and spare. "Austere" and "spare" are words that apply to Cook's small canvases; but the subject matter and feeling tone of the artists and their techniques were markedly different. There was, once more, a synergy in their union as artists. Cook had been a printmaker and she helped him become a painter; Brown's paintings came increasingly to resemble prints--flat and decorative, with meticulous graphic attention to form, color and composition.

Brown's willingness to test herself in the turbulent, frigid waters of the bay is hard to understand except by others who do it. Her swimming coach, Charlie Sava, was an important mentor, teaching her to distill to the essentials, as was her friend Modesto Lanzone, a Dolphin Club member who rowed beside her during arduous swims and helped her overcome her fears. "Everyone said she was too skinny to do it, and she was intimidated," Lanzone says. "But she was a fighter." Swimming became extremely important to her. For Lanzone as well as Brown, "water was a mental therapy." It's tempting to compare Brown's determination to stay afloat in the bay with her mother's threats to kill herself by jumping off the bridge. Swimming required a tremendous act of will, and perhaps more than any other challenge, built Brown's trust in herself.

Her 1976 self-portrait, "After the Alcatraz Swim #3," records a swim during which she became

disoriented and exhausted. Yet in the painting she sits neatly dressed, expressionless and composed in front of a painting of the bay, a tumult of waves in which swimmers and boats are tossed. Alcatraz Island and its prison building are silhouetted in the background. In this painting Brown comes to terms with the dualities of risk and security, life and death, imprisonment of the body (helplessness) and freedom of the mind. The work also indicates how tightly in control she kept her turbulent emotions. This Alcatraz swim, which she was to do twice more, was a profound experience from which she emerged stronger while coming to terms with her own frailties.

Her paintings of dancers are festive but with an edge of melancholy and occasionally the macabre. In "The Last Dance" (1972), a rat devours a dancer while others blithely walk on. In "Dancers in a City #2" (1972), she paints a woman dancing with an invisible man. Brown often painted men in shadow or dissolving, as though she couldn't quite believe they would always be there for her. The floor in "Dancers" is orange, the cityscape purple, and some sort of big dog stares intently at the viewer.

One of Brown's most romantic paintings is "The Kiss" (1976), painted after a trip to Italy with Modesto Lanzone. Based on the famous Rodin sculpture in Paris, and an embracing couple she observed on a park bench, "The Kiss" is a passionate, exuberant work dominated by deep red, a color Brown loved and used to great effect. The fluidity of the embracing couple and landscape contrast with the stiff embrace of "Dancers in a City."

In 1979, in keeping with her desire for spiritual community, Joan Brown began attending meetings at Ananda Community House in San Francisco, an offshoot of the Self-Realization Fellowship in southern California. There she met Michael Hebel. On the day of their wedding on May 11, 1980--a Hindu ceremony at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art attended by artists, art world denizens, police officers and lawyers--Brown joked, "Your friends aren't going to arrest my friends, are they?"

Theirs was a happy match with a core of affection and good will. "I was a good balance for her because she had a bucketful of tenacity and a thimbleful of patience," Hebel says. "I have a bucketful of patience and a thimbleful of tenacity."

Hebel moved into Brown's house on Cameo Way in San Francisco, which she had previously shared with her son and Gordon Cook. In a subtle way, this house recalled the home of her childhood. "There was something ingrown about it," Adelie Landis says. "It retracted in upon itself."

With an architect, Brown and Hebel remodeled the house to suit them both. A dark upper floor was turned into a light, open library and small meditation room, with glass doors leading into a rooftop solarium, where Brown placed a little mosaic fountain of her design. They also enlarged the dining room on the closed-in first floor, putting in a stone fireplace and bringing in light through a high window.

Noel Neri

Long fascinated with the quality of light in paintings by Rembrandt and Velasquez, she began to work on capturing light "shimmering from within" in her paintings, rather than applied from without. Brown was moving closer to the light she desired, a lightness of spirit. She and Hebel traveled several times a year, to Mexico, Italy, China and India, and she continued to paint prolifically. Always interested in public art, she completed a series of large obelisks for installation in public places. The ancient obelisk form intrigued and inspired her. Although three-dimensional, the surfaces of an obelisk are flat, so it bears some relation to a painting.

Her subject matter during the last decade of her life dealt increasingly with her spiritual beliefs and devotion to an Indian guru, Sathya Sai Baba, whom she and Hebel first encountered during their honeymoon in India. In addition, after rejecting Catholicism in her youth, Brown now returned to it through the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, for whom she felt deep affinity, in part because of his compassion for animals. During this time her use of symbols became less personal and idiosyncratic and increasingly conscious and studied. Some of her "metaphysical" paintings appear to be visual conversations in which she seeks to understand and appreciate Sai Baba's metaphors.

Noel Neri became a father in the mid-1980s, and Brown's tender portrait of her grandson fuses the personal and spiritual. "Portrait of Oliver Neri" (1988) is a portrait of a child and an inner self-portrait (the child signifying Brown's own innocence and openness), a grandmother's blessing, and an affirmation of faith. The little boy in bright overalls floats in a deep blue sky (the unlimited horizon of the soul) swept by dawn's rosy, glowing clouds. He wears two necklaces--one with a portrait of Sai Baba and the other a yin-yang--and holds a small lotus flower, symbol of spirituality, creation, knowledge and compassion. A jaguar and a deer rest at his feet, indicating a peaceable kingdom Brown believed was approaching.

In September 1990, Joan Brown and Noel Neri left California to install one of her obelisks in the new Eternal Heritage Museum at Sai Baba's ashram in India. The project was delayed, and Noel left after some weeks to return to California. On October 26, an improperly anchored turret in the museum fell, killing Brown and her assistants, Lynn Mainric and Michael Oliver, and destroying the obelisk. Her body was cremated at once and her ashes scattered into the Ganges, with none of her family present.

With no hope of knowing the exact circumstances of the tragedy, her family sought ways to come to terms with their loss. They were comforted by knowing how happy Brown had been, how sure of the signposts marking the progress of her inner journey.

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"Before I left, when we said goodbye, I realized that her life had changed," Noel Neri says. "She was living a spiritual life and our relationship was going to change, her relationship with her husband was going to change. I felt she couldn't end her life in a better time. So many people are sad and bitter when they die. I think she had a very glorious end."

In Joan Brown's last years she was moving towards a synthesis of universal and personal symbols, just as she had earlier synthesized the abstract and figurative. Art, intuition, and trust in the commonality of human experience were her pathways to the light of understanding. She graced the world with more fine work than many artists of great longevity leave behind. But we'll never know where, or how far, she might have traveled next.

Images from top:

1. Cover of The Museum of California magazine, Fall 1998, showing details of Joan Brown self-portraits spanning her 35 year career. In center right, detail of a photograph of the artist by M. Lee Fatherree.
2. Portrait of Lupe by Joan Brown, 1962. Oil on canvas, 30.125 x 25.25 in. Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, gift of Noel Neri. Photographed by M. Lee Fatherree.
3. Joan Brown's son, Noel Neri, photographed in 1998 by Abby Wasserman.

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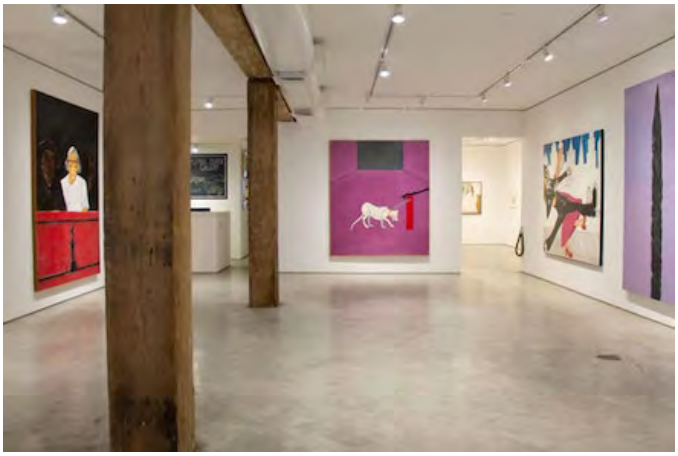
THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen

JOAN BROWN

By David Carrier



Installation view, *Joan Brown*, George Adams Gallery, New York. 2017.

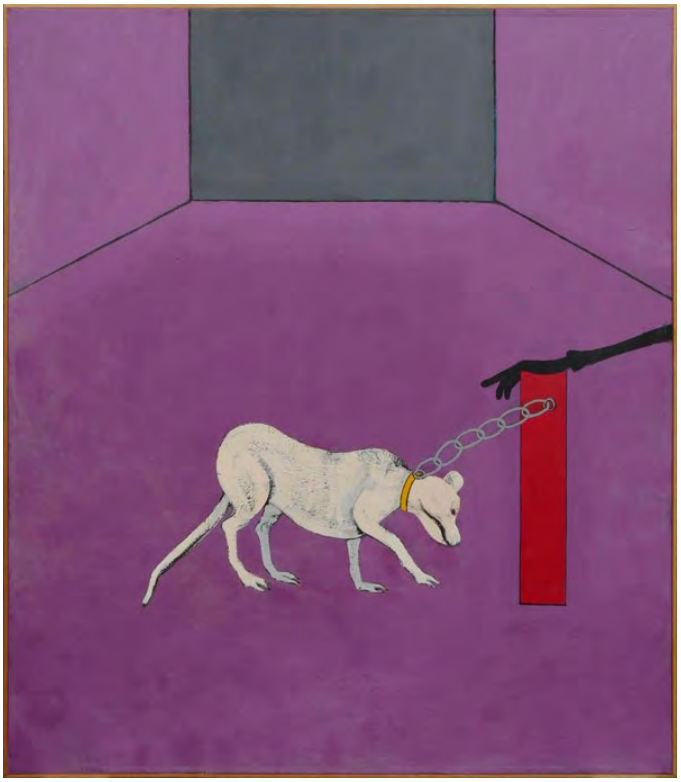
What defines modernist painting, and distinguishes it from old master European art, is the elimination of obvious details. This suppression permits expressive directness and pursuit of immediacy, which makes the figurative works of Matisse and Picasso, like the abstractions of Mondrian and Pollock, distinctively modernist. In this manner, visual art responds to the experience of everyday life in a culture where everything moves swiftly. As early as the mid-nineteenth century Charles Baudelaire recognized this much when he argued that because modern life involves rapid change, it "calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist." Accumulation of details is fussy, and fussiness is the sworn enemy of intense expressiveness. According to Delacroix, Baudelaire observed, "a good picture, which is a faithful equivalent of the dream which has begotten it, should be brought into being like a world." Only then, Baudelaire argued, can painting truthfully express contemporary life. What, he asks, "is pure art according to the modern ideal?" Then, although discussing Delacroix, in answering that question, Baudelaire nicely describes a great deal of modernist art, "It is the creation of an evocative magic, containing at once the object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself." By thus bridging the gap between an artist and the world, successful artwork is as vivid as a hallucination.

ON VIEW
George Adams
September 12 – November 4, 2017
New York

Carrier, David. "Joan Brown." *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2017.

Like such diverse otherwise figurative modernists as Alex Katz and Bob Thompson, Joan Brown (1938 – 1990), a San Francisco-based painter, foregrounds her subjects—people, animals, trees—on flat monochromatic and mostly detail-free backgrounds. Thus her *The Captive* (1975), a benign version of a Francis Bacon picture, depicts a chained dog standing on a purple field inside a large box. And in *Wolf in Room* (1974) a splendid black wolf sits on the floor in front of a brightly tiled wall. In *Acrobats and Spectator on New Year's Eve*, (1974) the two performers go through their routine in front of an abstract-looking background where someone is wearing a marvelous red and orange pointed hat. And *The Cyprus Trees* (1980) sets two tall trees before a violet-colored sky. The gallery handout says that her "late paintings turn simplicity into a spiritual gesture." That is exactly right. Brown learnt from early modernism the visual power of intense, expansive high-pitched color. Look at how her *New Year's Eve #2* (1973), with figures which are worthy of James Ensor, shows a skeleton dancing with a magically energetic woman in front of an urban skyline.

Brown is also an unfailingly inventive iconographer. *The Fan (Homage to Sai Babha)* (1980)—Brown's tribute to her Indian guru—depicts a spinning fan, which keeps turning even when the tiny power switch at the bottom right shows that the electricity to this fan is turned off. How imaginative, too, is the composition of *The Swimmers #2 (The Crawl)* (1974), with two swimmers, one in a one piece blue bathing suit, immersed in a green sea—Brown herself, it's worth recalling, was a champion swimmer. And *Noel's First Christmas* (1963), done in a painterly style very different from the large pictures in this show, is a marvelous image of her son. What gives unity to this body of varied subject matter is Brown's absolute mastery of the medium of painting. A well-drawn figure, Baudelaire says (speaking of Delacroix) "fills you with a pleasure which is absolutely divorced from its subject." That description applies word for word to Brown's paintings. Even before you can identify her subjects, her fast-moving compositions hold your attention.



Joan Brown, *The Captive*, 1975, Enamel on canvas, 85 x 73 inches

Carrier, David. "Joan Brown." *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2017.

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ARTFORUM

Joan Brown, *Wolf in Room*, 1974, enamel on canvas, 97 x 72".

NEW YORK

Joan Brown

GEORGE ADAMS GALLERY
38 Walker Street
September 12–November 4, 2017

Why isn't Joan Brown taken seriously? Despite support from curators and collectors throughout her trailblazing, four-decade-long career, Brown remains shockingly left out of the conversation. There are a few factors to consider: Brown was closely affiliated with "West Coast art" in the 1970s and 1980s, when the term was still used pejoratively; her sentimental subject matter was way ahead of its time (consider her domestic scenes, kissing couples, animal portraits, as well as various family members); and most notably, Brown wasn't afraid of painting an ugly picture, as her inclusion in Marcia Tucker's landmark "Bad Painting" exhibition of 1978 attests.

This concise and satisfying sampling of Brown's oeuvre offers the opportunity to bask in the glory of the prolific and ambitious artist, one pleasingly lurid canvas at a time. In her early twenties, Brown experienced a flash of success and fame as part of the Bay Area Figurative Movement—in a 1963 article, *Artforum* patronizingly referred to her as "everybody's darling." But Brown's work shifted away from expressionism and moved into territory uncomfortably close to the graphic arts in the mid to late 1960s, as exemplified by *Wolf in Room* and *The Swimmers #2 (The Crawl)*, both 1974. Brown turned to comic figuration at nearly the same time as Philip Guston, whose new work was equally reviled.

Brown painted contemporary life in a bizarrely ordinary manner and with great deliberation. Even her most seemingly simple work brims with caustic wit and humor, tempered by an uncommon sense of humility. *New Year's Eve* #2, 1973, shows a woman and a nattily dressed skeleton tangoing under a city skyline, assuredly ushering in the New Year. Keenly aware of the absurdity of being alive, Brown painted our chaotic world exactly as she saw fit.

— Beau Rutland

Rutland, Beau. "Joan Brown." *Artforum,* October 13, 2017.

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Weekend

An Endless Succession of Roles: Joan Brown's Self-Portraits

Nicole Rudick October 31, 2015

Joan Brown, "Year of the Tiger" (1983), enamel on canvas, 72 x 120 inches (© Estate of Joan Brown. Courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York) (click to enlarge)

When Joan Brown began attending the California School of Fine Arts in 1955, she was immediately dissatisfied with her classes and the structure of art education in general. The first year was mainly given over to commercial aspects, such as design, and she was dismissive of exercises centered on technical skills.

Just as Brown had all but decided to leave the school, she began a landscape-painting class taught by Elmer Bischoff, a leader, with Richard Diebenkorn and David Park, of Bay Area figuration. Brown discovered that Bischoff spoke her language, even though, she recalled in a long interview with Peter Karlstrom in 1975, "I had no idea what my language was." He also gave Brown a singular piece of advice: "You don't have to do

things right, just paint from your insides, let it go." By the 70s, and through to the end of her career, which was tragically cut short in 1990, Brown had fully embraced this notion: her rich interior life had become sole subject of her paintings.

Brown died twenty-five years ago this month, leaving behind a substantial body of work, yet the trajectory of her art and art making, as well as her role in the Bay Area scene, is under-recognized. Solo exhibitions of her paintings are infrequent, and large-scale shows on the East Coast are unheard of. A small survey at George Adams Gallery in New York last spring, Joan Brown: Major Paintings from the 50s, 60s, and 70s, gave shape to Brown's enthusiastic reception of Bischoff's example, showing how she searched her immediate environment for things to paint.

In a 1973 letter to the curator Brenda Richardson, Brown recalls that she "painted the first things I saw which was my dog and chair." "Portrait of a Chair," from 1958, was the only example of this very early work in the show. The intimate view of a chair and an empty easel is captured in a moody, autumnal palette and impasto brushwork. It's curious that Brown chose to call the work a portrait, rather than a still life. The word typically indicates the representation of a person; here, it suggests that the chair has taken on human qualities and that Brown's response to it is perhaps empathetic, especially given its proximity to the artist's easel.

In later paintings, Brown frequently included animals and created animal-human hybrids, such as mermaids and people with the heads of cats or dogs, which made tangible the complexities, as she saw them, of inner life and personhood. (A 1982 painting titled "Harmony," for instance, shows Brown split down the middle: on one half she is a painter, on the other, an orange cat.) The show includes only one painting from the '60s,

Joan Brown, "Gordon, Joan, and Rufus in Front of The S.F. Opera House" (1969), oil on canvas, 2 panels, 80 x 31 5/8; 80 x 60 inches (© Estate of Joan Brown. Courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York)

with the balance of the thirteen paintings on view from the '70s, when Brown had arguably begun making her mature work. "Portrait of a Chair" demonstrates the great degree to which her style changed from those student years; it also stands as an early foray into a concern that would occupy her for her entire career, namely, the representation of what she once termed "interior attitudes."

Bischoff believed that painting was a psychological act. In a statement written in 1956, he declared that "the visible facts of the paint on the canvas clarify and refine the painter's feelings"; the emotional quality of the figurative elements, or "the matter of feeling," is dependent upon color and form. Brown found these lessons confirmed in the 1950s through art she discovered mainly in reproduction; it was work whose expressive capabilities surprised and inspired her. She admired the humanity in Francis Bacon's paintings, for instance, noting to Karlstrom that "his sympathy, his anger, his understanding" were visible on the canvas. Of Rembrandt, she described the "tremendous exchange between the self and what he was portraying of himself on the canvas." She also discovered that she could use surface texture to convey the emotional content of a painting. Paint handling provided as rich a vocabulary as the imagery represented on the canvas and could express an emotional response to a person, a memory, a situation.

The late '60s saw a radical shift in Brown's work. At that point, her paint handling was gestural, with broad, impastoed strokes — heavily influenced by the Bay Area's interpretation of Abstract Expressionism. In June of 1965, she realized that she wanted "more conscious control" of her work, as she told Brenda Richardson in 1974. She stopped exhibiting for two years and had only one solo show between 1964 and 1970. Egyptian art had long appealed to Brown — she recalled, for instance, in her interview with Karlstrom, repeated visits as a child to the "ratty, rotten mummy" at the de Young museum, in San Francisco — and now she began studying Asian and Indian art at the de Young's new Avery Brundage Collection, one of the foremost Western collections of Asian art. Both her style and materials would change as a result of her exposure to this ancient art. "Taste," she opined in a 1982 interview with Lynn Gumpert, "is only what we are exposed to. What's commonplace in one culture is exotic in another." She eschewed the trowel and the palette knife and began using paint in washes. In 1970, she switched from oils to household oil enamels and painted frequently on Masonite; her surfaces became flat and her palette brighter.

Her painting "Gordon, Joan and Rufus in Front of S.F. Opera House," from 1969, reflects this change. The painting is a diptych, and Brown worked from a photograph of herself and her second husband. In the larger of the two panels, the couple stands on a sidewalk and faces the viewer, with two rows of trees receding into the distance behind them. The smaller panel depicts the dog Rufus in the bushes, on the outskirts of the primary scene (Rufus doesn't appear in the photograph). The painting's strong rectilinear elements disrupt one another: horizontal rows of bricks against the verticality of tree trunks; the strong parallel lines of red sidewalk blocks against the abrupt vertical break between the two canvases. The almost vertiginous illusion of distance is fractured, however, by the flatness of the bulbous, cartoony clouds, the mottling of the bushes and ground cover, and the frontal placement of the figures of Joan and Gordon against the picture plane, as though collaged onto this unreal setting. Rufus, meanwhile, sits obediently in profile, alone in his own panel.

The division of the painting, with humans/culture on one side and an animal on the other, may hint at the dual qualities, "the conscious and unconscious states," as she wrote in 1975, that Brown thought united people and animals. Egyptian art, with its stylized flatness and animal-human combinations, appears to

Joan Brown, "After the Alcatraz Swim #3" (1976), enamel on canvas, 96 x 78 inches (© Estate of Joan Brown. Courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York. Collection Palm Springs Desert Museum, California; gift of Steve Chase in honor of the 10th anniversary of the Contemporary Art Council.)

have exerted a strong pull on Brown's creative mind. But the illusion of depth combined with a perspectival flatness must also be attributed to her interest in Asian art.

An interest in linear detail and patterning also took hold of Brown at this point, both as an organizing principle and source of visual interest. In 1969, she taught at the University of Victoria, in Canada, and was fascinated by the patterning found in commercial design and on wares she saw in the Chinatown there. She felt that incorporating such elements — which appeared as regular patterns and, particularly, as checkerboards — into her work introduced a sense of organization and harmony; it was a "compulsion," she later told Karlstrom, "to have that kind of order in pictures" and she received "satisfaction from imposing order in a chaotic situation."

In "Twenty to Nine," from 1972, a white subway-tiled wall imposes a cold austerity on a scene in which a woman waits for a companion who hasn't shown. (I'm fascinated by the way the strict linearity of the tiles reflects not only the visual fact of the clock's evenly spaced minute and hour marks but also the very notion of the exacting and ceaseless passing of time at regular intervals.) "After the Alcatraz Swim #3," from 1975, juxtaposes the wall's vertical lines with a geometric rug that runs along the bottom of the canvas like a ribbon. Brown shows herself in a patterned dress sitting in a stylized, three-quarter pose at a table; the scene has the feel of a folk painting. The placidity of the interior setting is interrupted by a painting within

the painting, set against the wall behind Brown, which depicts swimmers struggling in the choppy waters of the San Francisco Bay. (Brown was an avid swimmer, and the sport is a frequent subject of her paintings.) This painting acts as a window into her memory, and not only do the irregular waves discompose the otherwise still scene, they seem to lap up and around the figure of Brown, tugging her into their disorder.

By this point, Brown's formal language was blunt yet fully expressive, enriched by a bright, bold palette. A trio of self-portraits (all enamel on Masonite) from the early '70s feel like a culmination of the impulses that, up to that point, had informed her art, and because they are self-portraits, they seem to have fulfilled her art-school lesson of finding subject matter in her immediate surroundings. As she would later say, in her interview with Karlstrom, of her deeply autobiographical work, "Myself, in an endless succession of roles, the things that are part of my daily life, are the best vehicles I can use to express what I feel about myself, my experience."

Joan Brown, "Self Portrait with Fish and Cat" (1970), enamel on masonite, 96 x 48 inches (© Estate of Joan Brown. Courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York. Collection Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas)

In "Portrait of a Girl," from 1971, Brown painted herself as a child. In "Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat," 1970, she appears as an artist, in paint-smeared clothes. And in "Christmas Time 1970 (Joan and Noel)," 1970, she has included her young son. In each of these works, Brown is the primary subject and stands facing the viewer, looming large and wide-eyed at the front of the composition. The paintings are large, Brown said in the interview with Gumpert, so that she can be a "participant" in them. Their size, too, puts the viewer on par with the versions of the artist that appear there; she looks out at us, and we look back at her.

This trio of paintings seems to give shape to Brown's experiences, forcing a recognition not simply of her "endless succession of roles" but of roles that were not then commonly celebrated in the art world, which was then under the sway of art that both reveled in nonrepresentational abstraction and dismissed art made by women as being secondary to that produced by men. Brown, however, saw no divide between her lived life and her artistic one. "Art," she would later tell Karlstrom, "is a by-product of a person and of one's life, of one's ideas, of one's feelings, of one's follies and foolishness, of all these things." And as is evident from these three self-portraits, she placed great importance on mining her own experience to the fullest. "I'm not any one thing," she told Gumpert in 1982. "I'm not just a teacher, I'm not just a mother, I'm not just a painter. I'm all these things plus, and the more areas I can tap the richer each one of the others will be."

Rudick, Nicole. "An Endless Succession of Roles: Joan Brown's Self-Portraits." *Hyperallergic,* October 31, 2015.

“Portrait of a Girl” is the only one of the three that uses the third-person in its title, as though Brown sought some distance between herself and the child — her adult life and her childhood. The view is retrospective, so she is already at some remove from the girl in the painting (who, it should be noted, is composed from a composite of photographs of Brown). But the painting is also emotionally taut with a unique interplay of formal, material, and representational elements. Brown had been in the habit of putting her unconscious into her work since art school, when she made the sculpture “Fur Rat” (1962), the manifestation of a dream she had had in 1959. In “Portrait of a Girl,” a large Chinese dragon appears on the wall behind the child, his head looming over hers. His presence is menacing, but he may serve as a symbol, as the psychic, animal manifestation — protective or triumphant — of Brown’s feelings about her unhappy childhood.

Adding to the dreamlike nature of the painting is the girl’s reflection in the dark, glassy floor, on which she appears to float. In 1970, Brown first introduced glitter and high-gloss commercial enamel paint into her work. Both elements help create dimension within the painting while emphasizing the imagery’s artificiality, as do the play of lines and depth in “Gordon, Joan and Rufus in Front of S.F. Opera House.” That tension — of both observing the painting’s dimensionality and being alert to its illusion — here equally describes the painting’s formal play and its simultaneous reconciling of Brown’s inner and outer lives.

The stunning “Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat” uses the same faux reflection; here, the figure of Brown hovers over a gridded red floor. The flat, monochrome background is offset by the painterliness of Brown’s paint-splattered shirt, pants, and shoes, which create a vertical expressionist field in the midst of the larger composition. The background is a glossy oxblood hue that resembles the porcelain glazes she may have seen on Chinese pottery at the de Young, though she was also exposed to the work of numerous Bay Area and California-based ceramicists and painters in the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, including Roy de Forest, Jeremy Anderson, and Ken Price, many of whom were using vivid color as an integral part of their art. This view of Brown as artist counterpoints the more circumspect view in “Portrait of a Chair”: where she was once the subject in absentia, she is now primary, her identity as an artist prominently on display.

By sharing the space in “Christmas Time 1970” with her young son, Noel, Brown shows another, equally significant side of herself. She has divided the canvas roughly into thirds: the top two are given over to a sky striated with the colors of a sunset; the bottom third is arrayed with multicolor fall leaves presented two-dimensionally. The striped colors in the sky and the well-ordered leaves have replaced the grids and checkerboards as an organizing principle. Here again, Brown seems to have made a connection with her unconscious life, as she noted to Karlstrom: “my dreams are … fantastically orderly, very clean, very clear, very bright in color. They look just like my paintings, as a matter of fact.”

In 1970, Brown made a self-portrait in which her head is enveloped by a swarm of symbolic figures, items that were meaningful to her: dogs, birds, fish, cats, a teddy bear, cartoon characters, a Chinese doll, ceramics, a bride and groom, a rat. By the end of the decade, the symbolic nature of her work had developed a more metaphysical feel. On a trip to India in 1980, she was introduced to the Hindu guru Sathya Sai Baba, and in the early ‘80s, she produced a series of homages—“Homage to Sathya Sai Baba,” “Homage to Quetzalcoatl and Count de Waldeck,” “Homage to Akhnaton”—that made explicit reference to her deeply spiritual turn. Many paintings from the last decade of Brown’s life show her engaged in a dialogue with with spiritual concerns.

Rudick, Nicole. “An Endless Succession of Roles: Joan Brown’s Self-Portraits.” *Hyperallergic,* October 31, 2015.

In “Summer Solstice,” from 1982, she resides in the night sky, a constellation in the background, and is literally clothed in Sanskrit; the painting provides no hints about the meaning of the ancient writing, an indication perhaps that its significance is personal and that this journey is meant for her alone. The ten-foot-long painting “Year of the Tiger,” from 1983, incorporates all of Brown’s impulses. A grouping of heavenly constellations, a color wheel containing astrological symbols, and Eastern-inspired forms are arranged neatly in the blue background and are bordered on either side by twin pillars and two black cats who look out at the viewer. Brown herself stands in the middle, also turned toward the viewer, paintbrush in hand: she is inextricable from the scene, both within it and outside of it, its creator and its subject.

Brown worked prolifically until her death, deepening her investigation into representing her inner life on the canvas — exploring the “animal” aspect of her consciousness, her relationships, and her interests. Her early work stands as evidence of the speed with which her own artistic language evolved and her fearless embrace of putting personal matters front and center in her art. “The exterior part of art is very, very fickle and very, very chancy,” she told Karlstrom in 1975, “so you concentrate on the interior elements.” This introspective yet intrepid artist felt compelled to show her “interior reasons” for creating a painting on canvas, and the two were inextricable: she was the art and art was her.

Rudick, Nicole. “An Endless Succession of Roles: Joan Brown’s Self-Portraits.” *Hyperallergic,* October 31, 2015.

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U.S. | CULTURE

From Semicartoonish to Simple Yet Subtle

Works by Joan Brown and Annette Lemieux, plus 'Life of Cats' at Japan Society

By Peter Plagens

April 10, 2015 5:26 pm ET

Joan Brown's 'Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat,' 1970, is on view at George Adams. PHOTO: GEORGE ADAMS GALLERY

Joan Brown: Major Paintings From the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s

George Adams
525-531 W. 26th St., (212) 564-8480
Through May 2

Joan Brown (1938-1990) was a prodigy in the "Bay Area Figurative style," and "Portrait of a Chair" (1958), which serves as a kind of frontispiece to this exhibition, is a stunning example of someone mastering scale, composition, color and hell-for-leather brushwork at the tender age of 19. But Ms. Brown is best remembered for her semicartoonish but still seriously expressionist paintings made from the late 1960s until her death in a freak construction accident in India. (She had become a devotee of a certain spiritual teacher and was installing an obelisk in his ashram when it fell and killed her.)

Ms. Brown led a fast-track life early on, but settled down after her marriage (the third of four) to

fellow artist Gordon Cook in 1967. “Joan, Gordon, and Rufus [their dog] in Front of the S.F. Opera House,” painted two years later and the largest work on view, is, in her mature style, another quite impressive painting—dignified yet intimate, simple yet subtle. In it and such works as a self-portrait with her son, “Christmas Time 1970 (Joan & Noel)” (1970), she essentially tones down and cheers up Max Beckmann’s brooding hyperbole.

Later, as presaged by “Woman Waiting in a Theatre Lobby” (1975), Ms. Brown would further simplify her human figures and backgrounds into semi-abstraction. While those paintings are certainly good, the ones in this show capture her high point.

Plagens, Peter. “From Semicartoonish to Simple Yet Subtle.” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2015.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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ARTFORUM

Joan Brown

SFAI WALTER AND MCBEAN GALLERIES

Joan Brown, who's strangely included in the "Exploration" show although she wasn't even a student at CSFA until five years after the period at hand, has traveled a path from prodigy as a "Bay Area figurative painter" in the early '60s, to a marginal, funk person in the mid-'60s, to a painter of what one might call bacon crumbs, "figurative, depicting mostly couples or groups of figures in the process of drinking, dancing, or reposing in restaurants." Brown paints, as she always has, with bludgeoning forthrightness: house paint viscosities, broad brushes, semiglossy surfaces, and sourly bright colors. She doesn't mess around: plunk! The image is there, dig it or don't. But such honesty is as precarious as academic scumbling, turning on the swivel of a wrist: are these paintings naive, *faux-naif*, naive *faux-naif*, or sophisticatedly fake *faux-naif*? You get the same doubting tingle with, say, Hockney, Kitaj, Lester Johnson, or Golub, with perhaps Dubuffet or H.C. Westermann able to steamroller through the problem. Similarly, Brown's content teeters on the edge of camp: fox-trotting couples, champagne glasses with bubbles, quilted nightclub motifs, top hats, and cabs. It all has the same edgy hokeyness as the titles "Dancers" and "Series" themselves (is there a painter alive who doesn't work in "series" or didn't just give it up six months ago?). Still, the pictures are likeable in a mangy way, like the rats that still crop up in her iconography, although they seem unfortunately in league with such *kitsch* phenomena as *Last Tango in Paris* (the awful dancehall scene), Bette Miller, funny shoes, and secondhand store dresses, which may or may not have less distance on *their* inspirations.

—*Peter Plagens*

Plagens, Peter. "Joan Brown." *Artforum,* 12, no. 4, December 1973.

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ARTFORUM

JOAN BROWN

Her Work Illustrates the Progress of San Francisco Mood

PHILLIP LEIDER

Joan Brown, "Gypsy Nativity," 67½x77½", 1960.

Everbody's Darling

In 1955, aged 17, Joan Brown enrolled as a freshman at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. In 1959 she received her B.F.A.; in 1960, aged 22, she 1) received her M.F.A. 2) held her first one-man show in New York, at the Staempfli Gallery; 3) became the youngest artist to be shown in the Whitney Museum's "Young America" exhibition. Since this modest entry into the art world, her work has found its way into the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Albright Art Gallery, among those of many other important institutions and individuals. Even magazines like *Look* and *Mademoiselle* cannot seem to resist her, lavishing upon her all the screwball awards and honors for eminent ladies with which they periodically come up.

An observer accustomed to a more stately,

Leider, Philip. "Joan Brown: Her Work Illustrates the Progress of a San Francisco." *Artforum,* June 1963, pp. 28–31.

time consuming biography, tends to find his comprehension somewhat stunned by this sort of progression. Can one so young be so deserving? Are the times such that one can simply be run through an art school as if on a conveyor belt, flopping out into success at the other end? Is there not, regardless of the amount of native talent, a process of self-discovery, maturation, experience, through which there is simply no shortcut, which an artist must undergo? It would seem, at least in Joan Brown's case, not, for her work offers some of the finest and most exciting examples of the rich mood (and mode) that has been developing in San Francisco over the past decade.

If there is a San Francisco style, a San Francisco attitude, that style and that attitude can be found epitomized in her paintings. That it was not her intelligence that went into the formation of this sensibility is irrelevant; that it was not out of her lifetime that the years of labor and experimentation came is simply her good fortune; what is important, and what is fascinating, is that the product of that intelligence and those labors appears in her work in pristine form. What is important is that what she inherited she did not adulterate, and that what she brings to her inheritance is a strong and considerable talent.

"The Attitude"

The situation into which Joan Brown happened to be born had been developing at the California School of Fine Arts since the days when Clyfford Still was teaching there, in the middle and late forties. They were the days when Still, Rothko, Pollock, and Gottlieb, among others, sought to embody in painting a new kind of energy by releasing into it a sign, at once abstract and concrete, having no reference in nature, but sounding within the viewer a response out of a common, primeval and mysterious consciousness. Communication on this level could not be easily talked about, and indeed a great part of the Still legacy in San Francisco is a mistrust of verbalization which easily became a mistrust of intellectuality: an entire complex of anti-intellectual attitudes remains characteristic of San Francisco art and artists. Corollary to a hesitancy to explain came a solemnity in the face of the high seriousness of this art, an attitude of fierce dedication which precluded concern with the fashionable aspects of the art world, and a distinct aversion for all its commercial aspects. (Still's subsequent removal of himself to isolation, his refusal

"The Moon Casts a Shadow on a Midsummer's Night," 6x12', 1962.

Leider, Philip. "Joan Brown: Her Work Illustrates the Progress of a San Francisco." *Artforum,* June 1963, pp. 28–31.

"Whipsanke (Homage to W. C. Fields)," 72x71", 1959.

"Burgie's on 101, Ignacio," 69x106", 1960.

"In place of the 'sign' emerges simply the 'shape' or 'thing' . . ."

". . . a surface of tough, moody, coarse, and even ugly paint . . ."

"Things in Landscape #2," 73½x72", 1959. (Collection: Fairweather-Hardin Gallery, Chicago.)

"El Verano," 70½x67¼", 1960.

Leider, Philip. "Joan Brown: Her Work Illustrates the Progress of a San Francisco." *Artforum,* June 1963, pp. 28–31.

"Girl in Chair," 60x48", 1962. (Collection Robert H. Ginter, Beverly Hills.)
(Photo Courtesy David Stuart Gallery, Los Angeles.)

"Family Portrait," 71x61", 1960. (Collection Mr. & Mrs. Samuel A. Taylor, New York.)
(All photos courtesy Staempfli Gallery, unless otherwise noted.)

to be handled by a commercial dealer and his refusal to exhibit his works except under the most exacting conditions has been often regarded as an irritating pose in Eastern art circles; in San Francisco it remains a subject of total admiration.) Lastly, and perhaps most important from the point of view of the image that was to evolve, was a total and violent rejection of any consideration of the painting as decoration. Above all, the form was to reflect the content, and a surface of tough, moody, coarse, and even ugly paint in muted colors, much worked-upon, was preferred to anything that might be called "attractive." (A tolerance for inexpensive materials—Joan Brown works, to the persistent dismay of her dealers, in the cheapest paints—derives in some part, at least, from this disdain for the decorative qualities of the media.) Lastly, the scale of the work was to correspond to its seriousness: the large painting became fundamental to the San Francisco style. These ideas, germinating in the San Francisco atmosphere, remained embodied after Still's departure, not only in his students, but in early works by himself, Rothko, Pollock and Gorky at the San Francisco Museum of Art. They formed the prevailing sensibility of the San Francisco Art Institute (the current name for the School) and reached succeeding generations of students primarily through the influence of Elmer Bischoff and Frank Lobdell.

Lobdell's own work, with certain modifications, reflects the tradition perfectly. Bischoff, a figurative painter, embodies the tradition in his person, and it is interesting that Lobdell's students are universally attracted to Bischoff, almost never because of his work, but because of his "attitude." (Joan Brown's figurative work is among the strongest and most intense figurative painting being done on the West Coast, and the reason for its compelling qualities is that it is informed by the "attitude" of the Still tradition. It has nothing in common with what is usually known as "California Figurative" painting, which drifts, for the most part, with neither attitude nor tradition to drive it.)

Leider, Philip. "Joan Brown: Her Work Illustrates the Progress of a San Francisco." *Artforum,* June 1963, pp. 28–31.

Still de-Stilled

What Joan Brown's work typifies is not, however, the complex of ideas and methods which derive directly from Clyfford Still, but the assimilation, and considerable distortion, of Still's teachings, by succeeding groups of San Francisco artists, who have pushed, twisted, ground and hammered Still's tradition into the image of San Francisco painting today. That image is not Still's image, though it is vastly informed by Still's attitude and method. Some of the elements of the Still tradition have been abandoned; some have been intensified; some have been completely misinterpreted. What we are dealing with is the progress of a mood.

For one, the idea of the "sign" as a totemic, primeval, and mythic communication has been steadily abandoned. In its place emerges simply the shape, or the "thing." Joan Brown's titles, for example, consistently refer to "things": *Things in the Sky at Night, Trying to Spear Things, Things in Landscape*. The "shape" or "thing" can be almost any form at all, and is not above being a joking reference to the shape of a car fender, a comic-strip lightning bolt, a penis or a breast or a vagina. A tendency to draw the shape from the vulgar (meaning low-brow) more than from the austere is characteristic of the entire trend of newer young painters in San Francisco, and this derives, not from the pop art movements recently so prominent, but from the congeniality of that other element of the tradition—anti-intellectualism. From what they are certain is the kiss-of-death of rationalism and intellectuality, they protect themselves with hillbilly music, comic strips, and monosyllables. This kind of anti-intellectuality is not what Still had in mind. What was to Still's group simply a mistrust of (and despair of) verbalizing, is for this group a rejection of the total verbal milieu.

A part of the attitude that remains, however, without modification is the total seriousness in the confrontation of art, and an intact sense of the distance between its mission and its mongers. "The attitude" combines a solemnity about art with a total rejection of standard art attitudes, particularly those of the Eastern artists. Joan Brown, whose dislike of New York artists and New York art is overt: "Those New York artists. All they do is visit each other's studios and talk a lot of baloney about art."

Intensified to the point of fanaticism in this area of San Francisco painting is the hatred of art as decoration, and to this can be attributed, more than to any other single factor, the sense of honesty, vitality and promise of the second generation of the San Francisco school, as opposed to the sense of chic, facility and compromise of the second generation of the New York School. Joan Brown, at the current stage of her career, holds more promise than Michael Goldberg, for example, does at the current stage of his.

This, in spite of the fact that she is, and will be, capable of committing some pretty horrible messes to canvas. For somewhere a long the line the price of a stubborn and willful dumbness has to be paid. The vitality, and the sense of a totally uncontaminated image that currently marks the best of her work and the work of her San Francisco contemporaries is only one side of the coin. On the other side are canvas after canvas exploiting "discoveries" that were commonplace to the Fauves, enormous dislocations of scale, and inept paint handling as an alternative to decorative paint handling. Whether or not the price of total commitment to a mood is ultimately even higher than this remains to be seen. ■

Leider, Philip. "Joan Brown: Her Work Illustrates the Progress of a San Francisco." *Artforum,* June 1963, pp. 28–31.