

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Reading Between the Linens: Cecily Brown at Gagosian Gallery

By DAVID COHEN | September 25, 2008

A visitor to a Cecily Brown exhibition must think of him- or herself as a camera. Contemplating one picture at a time is the default mode. Seeing the show in a single take is the wide-angle view. And focusing upon individual brush marks, smears, and squiggles is the furthest extension of the zoom.



Gagosian Gallery

Cecily Brown, 'Carnival and Lent' (2008).

In these terms, in the extremes of microcosm and macrocosm, her latest show of 39 canvases in three cavernous halls at Gagosian finds the artist in triumphant mode. It is hard to think of a contemporary painter with the skill or inclination to fill this kind of space with such sumptuous, riotous painterly activity, to achieve such consistency of tone, to sustain such energy. The literal stuff of paint sitting gorgeously on its surface can be exhilarating.

But when the fancy lens settings are turned off and you just peer through the viewfinder — when you look, in other words, at an individual canvas, to make sense of it as a contained statement — things really can start to go awry. The distorted views, it turns out, are just that.

Famously, Ms. Brown paints sex. That can mean a number of things, all of them true in her case: that she draws on pornographic sources, that she looks to a voluptuous tradition in Western picture-making, that she depicts or evokes the sex act, that her painterliness has its own erotics. Any which way, in seeking to account for her successes and failures as a painter, the temptation of bedroom analogies is irresistible. What exactly is going on between the linens?

A typical Brown painting is a vast swirling mush of gaudy, gooey, slippery color and gesture. Her brushstrokes rarely come in broad, form-defining, or mood-registering sweeps, but rather as discrete dabs, tosses, and flecks. Her pictures at first seem devoid of compositional thrust, in terms of where all her effects are leading, but often, when you focus for a while (and when you get used to her modus operandi, your decoding of her compositional strategy speeds up), legible figures emerge from amidst the painterly maelstrom. In "Skulldiver 3 (Flightmask)" (2006), for instance, one of three from a series of approximately 8-foot-square canvases in the exhibition's first and largest room, a pair of splayed female legs emerges, and then the eyes of a face buried in her sex; amidst the thick forest of frenetic little dabs and strokes, the legs read like a recumbent Gulliver tied and surrounded by Lilliputians. Other eyes, faces, body parts start to peek through the otherwise abstract, loose signifiers populating the picture's surface.

Ms. Brown certainly knows how to get juices flowing. Her "handling" recalls Renoir's notorious dictum that he painted with his penis. The marks are agitated, excitable, multidirectional, veering from violating to helpless but never coy. As in sex, the marks can seem lost in pleasure.

But where the paintings are the opposite of sex is in their lack of any kind of a developmental arc: For painting to exhibit equivalents of foreplay, excitement, climax, and oceanic resolution, there needs to be variety, structure, intentionality — aspects invariably absent in Ms. Brown's painting. If her work can be compared to the best-known piece of erotic music, Ravel's "Bolero," it is as if the piece starts with the

fortissimo penultimate passage, of most heightened excitement, and just stays there. No seductively languorous start, no quickening of pace, no final release.

Born in London and an adoptive New Yorker, Ms. Brown wears allegiances on her sleeve to the equally highly sexed schools of these respective cities. Her early work looked to the cartoony, referential figuration of early Paula Rego, David Hockney, and R.B. Kitaj; her more recent work is steeped in the grand, almost operatic mannerisms of [Francis Bacon](#) and [Lucian Freud](#), cannibalizing the luster of Old Master paintings while delving into a visceral sense of physical immediacy. It is the latter quality that she takes from Abstract Expressionism, in particular that of Willem de Kooning, recalling his quip that flesh was the reason oil paint was invented. Bacon also spoke of wanting to paint rivers of flesh, Mr. Freud of wanting his paint "to work as flesh."

While Ms. Brown's rich palette expresses a panoply of chromatic emotion, priority is frequently given to flesh tones, to pinks and whites, almost as if — in the spirit of the macho masters she has adopted — she were indeed dipping her brushes into flesh pots. But what, then, is the meaning of evoking the pleasures of the flesh in frenetic, staccato jabs, as opposed to seductive sweeps, or purposive, depictive marks, or cohering abstract designs?

The American sensibility of "alloverness," the "energy made visible" of Jackson Pollock, stands in opposition to the more traditional and accentuated contrast found in Bacon and Mr. Freud between figure and ground. Ms. Brown has evidently plumped for the American strategy, though without the compelling organizing principle that gave Abstract Expressionism its integrity. What seemed at first so impressive, that she has filled the entire museum-like space of Gagosian Gallery with image after image bursting with high-octane painterly activity, can quickly tire the suspicious viewer with the thought that here orgasm can be bought by the yard.

The glimpses of figure fragments do suggest, however, that her painting is haunted by old hierarchies. And it is the minority of pictures where greater distinction between one area and another — between heavily and lightly worked passages, between figures

(whether actual figures or abstract shapes) and ground — offers the eye some respite from her unremitting mark-making. "New Face in Hell" (2008) is such an example, as is "Momento Mori I" (2006-08), which exudes a sense that the white coagulation of forms occupying the center is indeed figures of some sort, pushing out from the picture plane, and that a definable room with delineated objects surrounds them. This is the last painting you see on exiting the gallery, and is one of her most hopeful, because it is composed, and thereby committed to a central event, and by implication, therefore, to the possibility of resolution.

Until October 25 (555 W. 24th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-741-1111).