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CECILY BROWN - MEMENTO MORI 1



Cecily Brown

THE AURA OF AN EXPANDED PAINTER

Nicola Trezzi



GOOD ARTISTS CAN be easily misunderstood, but only a few excellent artists — expanded artists — are pleased with this misunderstanding and have the ability to take advantage of it. Cecily Brown is, no doubt, one of these artists. We assume that since the '80s, painting has “represented a fragment of a more complex situation”¹; perhaps this is illustrated by early watercolor animations of sexual penetration made by Brown and shown in New York only last year. Her oeuvre can be associated with the practice of Kippenberger² or the eponymous ADS series by Jeff Koons.³ With an ego that is less visible (but no less powerful) than that of one of the aforementioned male artists, Brown is a hardcore performer who smartly hides her acts behind her paintings. In other words, her canvases are energized by her

performances, which are only unofficially documented by the press. We all know about the article she had in *Vogue*, or when she posed in a bikini for a portrait by David LaChapelle in *Interview*.⁴ To be precise, this attitude was inaugurated also in on another platform. It was 1999 when the blockbuster exhibition “Sensation” confronted the American audience at the Brooklyn Museum. Even if the newspapers’ attention had been focused on the scandalous *Holy Virgin* by Chris Ofili, another big deal was happening that night. At the opening of the “Young British Art”⁵ survey, English-born, New York-based Cecily Brown showed up in a dress that could be compared only with Cher’s outfit when she attended the Academy Awards in 1987, when she won the Best Actress award for *Moonstruck*. The picture of Brown, wisely captured by

Artnet’s Paul Laster, can be considered her real breakthrough, while the event is a seminal point for her practice.

Aware of this certitude, what could be the difference between the songs of Britney Spears, whose tracks have half their power if considered without her teen sensation image (albeit no more),⁶ and the art of Cecily Brown? Could we consider Brown’s practice as one of the smoothest methods to simultaneously please and denigrate the

A portrait of Cecily Brown by Todd Eberle, published in “Gotta Paint!” by Ingrid Sischy, Vanity Fair (America), February 2000. Courtesy Vanity Fair.
Below, from left: *Indian Tourist*, 2008. Oil on linen, 246 x 226 cm; *Carnival and Lent*, 2006-08. Oil on linen, 246 x 262 cm; *Study for Sam Mere II*, 2008. Oil on linen, 216 x 226 cm. Opposite: *Skulldiver IV*, 2006-07. Oil on linen, 216 x 226 cm. All images, courtesy Gagosian, New York/Los Angeles/London/Moscow/Rome. © Cecily Brown.



art system and its resolute desire to produce commodities? How many artists are able to proceed in a paradoxical situation, where their practice can be seen as a continuous gambit towards the ephemeral while the work has all the elements of a masterpiece? Speaking of masters, we need to recall Brown's attitude toward her predecessors. "Cecily Brown's photographs in *Vanity Fair*, which were taken by Todd Eberle, show her reclining on a studio floor that is splattered with paint and dotted with cigarette butts in a manner that would have done Pollock proud."⁷ From championing to sampling — subverting the machismo of painters once supported by Clement Greenberg (Pollock, and above all De Kooning) and their British friends Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon — Brown is transforming rudeness into sensuality, violence into glamour.

In this sense, Bacon can be taken as the most intriguing of her detournements: Cecily Brown is the daughter of the leading art critic David Sylvester, who was influential in promoting Freud and especially Bacon,⁸ with whom he did several interviews. In a sort of "post-post"⁹ and reversed Oedipalian counterattack, Brown is manipulating her father's protégés, underlining that she has learned the lesson better than many art historians, and has re-drawn a new chapter — an insane hermeneutic that turns Masculine Modernity into a feminine seductive conjugation of Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought" ("pensiero debole").

Confirming the example of the expanded nature of her practice and her talent for looking at and understanding her colleagues and predecessors, Brown's *Flash Art* essay "Painting Epiphany" is an ode to

the pleasure of painting and a sweetened way to herald her "Fuck off macho painter scum" approach.¹⁰ How can we decode all of these bizarre and almost degenerated interpretations presented thus far? What is the key to decoding Brown's oil on linen compositions in this sense? Are the artworks the real core of Brown's practice or is it our dreaming of her, lying on the floor of her studio? To quote Jean Dubuffet (the father of all the expanded painters), "Art does not lie down on the bed that is made for it; it runs away as soon as one says its name; it loves to be incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets what it is called." ■

Nicola Trezzi is US editor of *Flash Art International*.

Notes:

1. Helena Kontova, "From Performance to Painting," *Flash Art International*, February - March 1982, p.17.
2. "Kippenberger polluted the idea of the grand gesture; his production revealed a motivation designed to extinguish reverence rather than compound it. He took responsibility for the contextualization and dissemination of his ideas." Lucy McKenzie, "Now that this has been done it will never have to be done again, Nach Kippenberger," Vienna, Schlegel Ed., 2003, pp. 191-5, quoted in "Kippenbergiana. Avant-Garde Sign Value in Contemporary Painting," Alison Gingeras's essay published in Saatchi's *The Triumph of Painting* ex. cat..
3. "During the 1988-89 art season, Koons and his galleries put their money where their mouth was. A series of full-page advertisements was purchased in the major trade magazine of the time: *Artforum*, *Flash Art*, *Arts*, and *Art in America*. In the center of each highly theatrical tableau, Koons presided over the scene smiling smugly at the camera, impeccably groomed, obviously airbrushed." Alison Gingeras, "The Birth of Crass: The Artist's persona in the Age of Advance Capitalism," *Monument to Now*, Athens, Deste Foundation, 2004, p.141.

4. "I'm playing a risky game by doing things like that photograph. The thing about the *Interview* photograph is that it's not about the portrait, it's a David LaChapelle, and it's so obviously a parody." Odili Donald Odita, "Cecily Brown, Goya, Vogue, and the politics of abstraction," *Flash Art International*, November - December 2000, p. 74.

5. "London can keep its YBA's, or Young British Artists. New York may have a hip abbreviation of its own, the BYT's: Beautiful Young Things." Roberta Smith, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman; Glossy Images That Both Mimic and Mock Male Sexuality," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2000.

6. "Sorry, but it was impressed. In the year's most psychotic media moment, Britney created more real than reality TV: entertainment without borders, an unconsciously brilliant deconstruction of American Idolism, a disintegration of slo-mo. You could almost call it art." Kim Gordon, "Best of Music," *Artforum*, December 2007, p. 82.

7. Roberta Smith, *ibid.*

8. "The death of Bacon has made it easier (for me) to make paintings." Cecily Brown, "Painting Epiphany," *Flash Art International*, May - June 1998, p. 78.

9. "So would you call yourself a post modernist painter? Post, post." Odili Donald Odita, *ibid.*, p. 72.

10. See: Andreas Schlegel, "Fuck off macho painter scum," *Prague Biennale 3* ex. cat, Giancarlo Politi Editore, Milan 2007, pp. 299-304.

11. See: Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," presented as a reprint in *Prague Biennale 2* ex. cat. as a key text for the section entitled "Expanded Painting" curated by Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova.

Below, from left: *Bye Baby Bunting*, 2008. Oil on linen, 165 x 110 cm. Courtesy Gagosian, New York/Los Angeles/London/Moscow/Rome. © Cecily Brown; CHUCK CLOSE, *Cecily*, 2000. Oil on linen, 259 x 213 cm. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson. © Chuck Close; *Crucifixion Picnic*, 2008. Oil on linen, 165 x 109 cm. Courtesy Gagosian, New York/Los Angeles/London/Moscow/Rome. © Cecily Brown.

