

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The INDEPENDENT

In the Studio: Cecily Brown, Painter

'As I get more assured of the fact that I can paint, I don't mind if my influences show'

Karen Wright

Painter Cecily Brown lives and works in New York City. She has been in this studio, a former office near Union Square, for two years, since she moved from the nearby meat-packing district.

It is a lovely airy space, with much evidence of the presence of the four-year-old daughter of her marriage to her architecture-critic husband Nicolai Ouroussoff. Brown was born in 1969 in London; her mother is the writer Shena Mackay and her father is the late art critic David Sylvester. She is that oxymoron, a fashionable painter, with waiting lists of collectors queuing up for her paintings.

Brown has just opened a show in LA and is jet-lagged, although she still manages to look the image of the chic artist. She tells me that the works surrounding us are not finished, but are all in various stages. She works on up to 20 paintings at a time, allowing them to dry in between so she can be as gestural as she wants to be when she goes into a work.

I have not seen a show of her works for a few years and am surprised by the sheer number of recognisable figures in her paintings. I have always associated Brown with gestural, juicy paint, often reminiscent of Willem de Kooning, an artist whose work she openly admires. Looking around, she admits that the recent works are a departure from the obscured and more thickly applied paintings. "I have been looking at Munch and Beckmann. I find as I get more assured of the fact that I can paint, I don't mind if my influences show."

I ask about the parallel shift in subject matter and she replies: "I felt I had been doing female nudes long enough." As for the notable variety of faces: "As I'm painting, each face has a library in my mind. I have been teetering back and forth with a narrative recently. With a sea of faces you have to address the face differently, each gives the other permission – they can be photographic or cartoony."

Brown came to NY after studying at the Slade. She worked as a waitress to make ends meet and then got a job in an animation studio where, during her spare time in the evenings, she made her one and only film, an erotic work that made me blush when I saw it.

Brown says that painting a lot "takes the pressure off". She tells me that her friend and fellow painter Charline von Heyl gave her the best definition of what painting needs to be: "the left-hand corner does not prepare me for the right-hand corner". It must always be "unpredictable." She points to a large canvas in progress, predominantly blue with a recognisable cavorting goat in the foreground. "I am not sure about that work; it came to me too easily."