

DIRECTIONS

Cecily Brown

November 14, 2002–March 2, 2003



Hoodlum, 2000–01, oil on linen, 75 1/8 x 90 1/8 in (190.8 x 228.9 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden: Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 2001.



Father of the Bride, 1998–99, oil on canvas, 100 x 110 in (254 x 279.4 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Sarah Norton Goodyear Fund, 1999.

I'm trying to be in a space between abstraction and figuration. . . . The place I'm interested in is where the mind goes when it's trying to make up for what isn't there. When something is just suggested. . . .

Cecily Brown, 1999

The best way to describe my paintings might be as fiction.

Cecily Brown, 2002

WITH THEIR COMPLEX compositions and explosive energy, the paintings of Cecily Brown can transport a viewer to realms of hedonistic pleasure and subliminal uncertainty. Through distortions of form, scale, and space, fragmented images dissolve into passages of pure painting. Intertwined shapes, glistening surfaces, and intense colors create kaleidoscopic effects that veil the graphic figurative content of these intricately wrought canvases.

A self-described painter's painter, Cecily Brown came of age artistically in an era when the art of painting and the act of figurative representation have been regarded with some suspicion. Born in

London in 1969 and educated at London's Slade School of Art, she resisted the influence of the Young British Artists who dominated the art world at the time.

Instead, she remained true to her childhood love of drawing and rejected the prevailing focus on conceptual, media, and performance-based art practice. In 1994, she moved to Manhattan where she immediately found a more congenial creative atmosphere and work as a film animator. The following year, she produced hundreds of lyrical watercolors for an animated short, *Four Letter Heaven*, which featured witty variations on erotic imagery.

Building upon those watercolors, Brown went on to develop multifigure compositions in oil. For these, she devised cartoon-like bunnies derived in part from her earlier drawings of ducks and rabbits. Brown deployed these surrogates for human figures in demonic scenes of lust and mayhem inspired by such biblical and historical subjects as the Massacre of the Innocents and the Rape of the Sabines. In *Untitled* (1997), one of the last of the series of so-called "bunny" paintings, a host of eerily human rabbit-creatures whirl around a light-filled aureole. The contorted figures in this fantastic composition reflect Brown's fascination with the visionary images of the fifteenth-century Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch, particularly his *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1504, Prado Museum, Madrid).

The rabbit imagery also arises from Brown's interest in perceptual conundrums. She explains that she is indebted to the duck/rabbit optical puzzles of the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and to the similar illusionistic tricks in the work of contemporary American painter Jasper Johns. Such visual puns, in which one shape or form may evoke multiple images, are a leitmotiv in Brown's work.

Between 1998 and 1999, Brown replaced rabbits with human bodies in orgiastic compositions. She feels compelled to depict human beings in carnal

embrace because, in her words, sexuality is "universal. It's not obscure. . . . Sex is such a driving force, a life force [. . .] even the simple fact [that] that's how we're here."² In paintings such as *Father of the Bride* (1998–99) or *Second Honeymoon* (1999), Brown's quest to capture the generative power of sexuality yields a tumultuous overlay of gestural marks that transforms explicit imagery into vibrantly expressive pictorial fictions. Her use of romantic movie titles for these paintings underscores the fictive nature of their subjects. Brown believes that the complex visual problems posed in her work offer the viewer something of the drama, surprise, and excitement of the cinematic experience.

The dramatic action in *Second Honeymoon* revolves around a reclining female figure with a dangling leg and a green high-heeled shoe. She is caressed by two largely obliterated, flanking male "suitors." The elastic expansion and distortions of the central female body convey the tensions felt by a woman torn between poles of attraction. The amorous situation also recalls Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23, Philadelphia Museum of Art), a mixed-media glass object about the theme of the female pursued by multiple lovers. In place of Duchamp's mechanistic vision of



Dogday Afternoon, 1999, oil on canvas, 75 x 90 in (190.5 x 228.6 cm). Private collection, New York; courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.

human sexuality, Brown substitutes a vibrant eroticism presented from a woman's perspective.

In Brown's most compelling canvases, the erotic fictions from which the compositions originated have been altered beyond recognition. Only the hint of a statuesque central figure remains amidst the tapestry of deft paint strokes that animate *Father of the Bride*. In *Hoodlum* (2000–01), the artist exploits the fluidity of flesh-toned pigments to embody sensuality itself. She entices the viewer into her pictorial world by evoking a state of flux that mirrors the dynamism of the creative process and our own fleeting existence. She speaks of capturing "a sense of things becoming or of things that exist dissolving." Brown explains that very often her paintings "are not the works I set out to paint." Rather, each painting becomes a record of the struggle between her original idea and the demands of the painting as it evolves through constant reworking. Brown's goal is "to make people look as long as possible" so that "the experience of looking is like the experience of painting."

For Brown, visual perception often combines voyeurism with exhibitionism. *Dogday Afternoon* (1999), which explores that reciprocal relationship, began as a species of self-portrait with an image of the artist's outstretched forearm in the upper left. Painted in her New York studio on an oppressively hot day, the composition incorporates prints of her torso. Here Brown expands the body painting technique of French artist Yves Klein, who used models as "living brushes" in his "Anthropometry" paintings of 1960–62. Also embedded within the glistening black areas of the nearly monochromatic composition are ghosts of lip prints. The motif of breasts that double as eyes throughout the canvas embodies the twin themes of exhibitionism and voyeurism. (Brown acknowledges Willem de Kooning's work and Philip Guston's use of Cyclopean eyes in his late paintings as sources for the breast/eye pun.) This manipulation

of intimate body imagery across the horizontal expanse of the canvas creates a vast spatial arena.

The implication of landscape-like space in *Dogday Afternoon* finds fuller expression in Brown's most recent paintings. With bravura brushwork and vibrant atmospheric effects, these more intimately scaled compositions contain allusions to the classical landscape tradition of the seventeenth-century French painter Nicolas Poussin. For *Bacchanal* (2001), the first of her landscapes to include trees, she studied Poussin's painting *The Triumph of Pan* (1636, National Gallery, London). While a welter of flesh-colored marks in the foreground conjures a bacchanalian revel, the trees framing that action assume equal importance for the artist: "Trees are so extreme in their forms. Real trees are more extravagant in their poses than anything you could think of."

Brown's receptivity to a wide array of visual sources from all periods of art history differs from the practice of appropriation in contemporary art. Rather than mimic the art of earlier generations as an act of ironic commentary, Brown considers her work part of a continuum of creativity:

I always feel . . . this collaboration with all the artists that I've looked at; they come out at different times. . . . One of the things I find so exciting about painting is that I do see it as non-linear—you can have Uccello in your head next to Baselitz [. . .] but I rarely think about any other painter when I'm actually working.

While some critics have recognized affinities between Brown's most "abstract" compositions and the heroic paintings of Abstract Expressionist artists such as Willem de Kooning, whom she admires, Brown believes her works arise primarily from the particular aspects of figure painting that she set out to explore. By blending allusions to high-art masterpieces with references to popular culture, Cecily



Bacchanal, 2001, oil on linen, 48 x 60 in (121.9 x 152.4 cm). Private collection, New York; courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.

Brown subverts artistic traditions to create new and vital pictorial fictions.

Judith Zilczer
Curator of Paintings

NOTES

Special thanks are due to John Good of Gagosian Gallery, New York, and to interns Karyn Miller and Marielle Wardian for their assistance: Unattributed statements by the artist are from conversations with the author in New York on March 8 and September 6, 2001, and April 17, 2002, and a telephone conversation on August 12, 2002.

1. Cecily Brown cited by Dodie Kazanjian, "Fleshing It Out," *Vogue* 189, no. 2 (February 1999): 253.
2. Brown in an interview with Odili Donald Odita, "Cecily Brown: Goya, *Vogue*, and the Politics of Abstraction," *Flash Art* 33, no. 215 (November–December 2000): 74.
3. Brown in an interview with Adrian Dannatt, "Goodness gracious! Dare one say landscape paintings?" *Art Newspaper*, no. 123 (March 2002): 21.

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Untitled, 1997, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in (121.9 x 152.4 cm). Collection Douglas S. Cramer.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1. *Untitled*, 1997, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in (121.9 x 152.4 cm). Collection Douglas S. Cramer.
2. *Spree*, 1998–99, oil on linen, 75 x 75 in (191 x 191 cm). Collection Douglas S. Cramer.
3. *Father of the Bride*, 1998–99, oil on canvas, 100 x 110 in (254 x 279.4 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Sarah Norton Goodyear Fund, 1999.
4. *Dogday Afternoon*, 1999, oil on canvas, 75 x 90 in (190.5 x 228.6 cm). Private collection, New York; courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.
5. *Second Honeymoon*, 1999, oil on linen, 100 x 110 in (254 x 279.4 cm). Collection Michael and Ninah Lynne.
6. *Hoodlum*, 2000–01, oil on linen, 75 1/8 x 90 1/8 in (190.8 x 228.9 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 2001.
7. *Bacchanal*, 2001, oil on linen, 48 x 60 in (121.9 x 152.4 cm). Private collection, New York; courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Gallery Talk: *Meet the Artist*

Thursday, November 14, 12:30 pm
Join Cecily Brown for a discussion of her work.
Directions Gallery, third floor.

Art Explorers Workshop for Adults: *Exposed!*

Friday, November 22, 1–3 pm
Art activities for adults. Preregistration is required:
call 202-357-3235, ext. 116, or e-mail
education@hmsg.si.edu.

Film: *Decasia* (2002)

Thursday, February 13, 8 pm
Bill Morrison's lyrical montage of black-and-white vintage film fragments follows Brown's 1995 animated short *Four Letter Heaven*. Shown in conjunction with Art After Hours: Hirshhorn Heartfest. Ring Auditorium.

Gallery Talk: *Cecily Brown and the Romance of Painting*

Friday, February 14, 12:30 pm
Join Curator of Paintings Judith Zilczer for a discussion of the exhibition. Meet at the Information Desk.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in London, 1969. Earned diploma in art and design from Epson School of Art, Surrey, England, 1987. Studied drawing and printmaking at Morley College, London, 1987–89. Earned Bachelor of Fine Arts from Slade School of Art, London, 1989–93; graduated with First Class Honors. Won first prize in "Contemporary View," British national art competition, 1990. Made short animated film, *Four Letter Heaven* (1995), which premiered at Telluride Film Festival and toured internationally, winning awards at Ann Arbor, Big Muddy, and Black Maria Film Festivals. Lives and works in New York City since mid-1990s.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2002 Gagosian Gallery, New York
2001 Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin (catalog)
2000 Gagosian Gallery, New York (catalog)
1999 Victoria Miro Gallery, London; Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills
1998 Deitch Projects, New York
1997 Deitch Projects, New York
1995 Eagle Gallery, London

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York;
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York;
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Museum
für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main; Seattle Art
Museum; Tate Modern, London.

ARTIST'S STATEMENTS AND INTERVIEWS

- 2002 Dannatt, Adrian. "Goodness gracious!
Dare one say landscape paintings?" *Art
Newspaper*, no. 123 (March): 21.
2000 Oditia, Odili Donald. "Cecily Brown: Goya,
Vogue, and the Politics of Abstraction." *Flash Art* 33, no. 215 (November–
December): 70–74.
1999 Kazanjian, Dodie. "Fleshing It Out." *Vogue*
189, no. 2 (February): 252–55.
Wakefield, Neville. "Cecily Brown." *Interview* 29, no. 10 (October): 335.
1998 Brown, Cecily. "Painting Epiphany: Happy
Days Are Where, Again?" *Flash Art* 21,
no. 200 (May–June): 76–79.

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15 March 2002, sec. E, p. 36.

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12 (Summer 1999): 98.

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no. 211 (March–April 2000): 114.

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38, no. 8 (April 2000): 141.

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(February 2000): 140–47.

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Woman." *New York Times*, 5 July 2000, sec. E, pp. 1, 5.

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2000, sec. E, p. 42.

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Fun." *New York Times Magazine*, 30 January 2000,
sec. 6, pp. 37–39.

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no. 91 (May–June 2002): 91.

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