

Woman Preparing for a Shower, 1975



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Joan Brown uses Sherwin-Williams house paint. Her colors are high-keyed and aggressive. She depicts the commonplace in a boldly stylized manner. At first glance, her paintings present a deceptively simple facade. Thereafter, these works reveal the artist's highly sophisticated gift for communicating incisive perceptions about the human condition with an accent on loneliness and anxiety, on hidden fears and human folly. Brown's works are often infused with irony, not the least of which is that she currently explores these ominous concerns through familiar autobiographical situations in her own exuberant style.

Brown received early recognition as a painter. By 1960, when only twenty-two years old, she had already received wide critical acclaim. Her work at this time was highly expressionistic. With a Fauve-like palette she applied the paint thickly, using loose broad brushstrokes. Since that time her style has gone through several major changes, confounding some of her original admirers.

Braving critical disaffection and the disapproval of dealers Brown insisted on her right to grow and to change:

In the fall of 1964, I started feeling a great need for a change in my paintings. I was feeling restless and felt there was more than what I knew about. So in January of 1965 I decided to take a new step forward. I put away all my palette knives and trowels, and decided to do some small still lifes in subtle color. I wanted more conscious control of my work at this point. (As quoted in Joan Brown, University Art Museum.)

During this time Brown (an admirer of Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky) began to develop her inclination to draw with paint. The two works in MATRIX - Woman Preparing For a

Shower and The Night Before the Alcatraz Swim (both of 1975) - suggest the maturity and skill with which she now handles line and outline. Unexpected changes in her imagery also occurred. By 1966 Brown was introducing fanciful conceptions of reindeers, tigers, buffalo and wolves. These were later followed by tuxedoed skeletons fox-trotting across desolate urban landscapes. The works in MATRIX represent a return to more specifically personal subject matter. They also mark the artist's increased emphasis on intentionally acknowledging the flatness of the canvas itself.

Woman Preparing For a Shower is a very carefully constructed painting. Brown uses her familiar motif of large decorative areas of confined patterns: dots, checkered squares, etc. The technique of extending the plane of the floor out to the viewer and the emphatic perspective lines are both common to her recent work. When this heightened sense of perspective is confronted and contradicted by large areas of flat color and flat patterns a volatile and intriguing tension is set up. In the midst of this drama, a woman disrobes with a vacant expression. Her face is unsettlingly close in shape and size to the nearby shower head. Despite the fact that her arms are involved in a most awkward and active moment the scene is strangely static. Her belt dangles at her side, echoing the shape and size of the dog. Upright and seemingly stable on two legs, this anthropomorphic canine, with a wash cloth in his mouth, preposterously attends the woman. This painting which initially seems ingenuous sustains many contradictions: depth vs. flatness, motion vs. stasis, emotion vs. catatonia, ordinary vs. absurd.

In The Night Before the Alcatraz Swim the artist, an accomplished and diligent

swimmer. sits in limp repose contemplating (or is she impervious to?) the daring and strenuous feat she will actually undertake the following day. Brown is surrounded by gaudy orange knotty pine walls, animated with ocular knots. In the background a silhouette of her destination looms in ominous darkness.

Despite her free use of personal imagery, Brown values her privacy and possesses a firm determination to remain independent of outside pressures. In this Brown feels deeply influenced by her mentor, Bay Area painter Elmer Bischoff. She credits him for instilling the extraordinarily high level of personal conviction so much admired by her peers. The two paintings in MATRIX confirm that in following her convictions Brown's stylistic innovations and her inventive command of imagery continue unabated.

Joan Brown was born in San Francisco in 1938. She received a BFA in 1959 and a MFA in 1960 from the San Francisco Art Institute (then the California School of Fine Arts). Brown received the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award in 1965 and an individual artist fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1976. She has taught at the University of California at Berkeley since 1974 where she is an Assistant Professor. Brown lives in San Francisco and is represented by the Allan Frumkin Gallery of Chicago and New York City and the Hansen-Fuller Gallery of San Francisco.

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Works in MATRIX:

Woman Preparing For a Shower, 1975, enamel paint on canvas, 84" x 72". Lent by Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York City.

The Night Before the Alcatraz Swim, 1975, enamel paint on canvas, 84" x 72". Lent by Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York City.

Selected one-woman exhibitions:

6 Gallery, San Francisco '57 (first); Batman Gallery, San Francisco '59; Staempfli Gallery, NYC '60, '61, '64; David Stuart Gallery, Los Angeles '61, '62, '64; Hansen-Fuller Gallery, San Francisco '68, '76; San Francisco Museum of Art '71; San Francisco Art Institute '73; University Art Museum, Berkeley '74; Allan Frumkin Gallery, NYC '74, '76.

Selected group exhibitions:

Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Young America 1960 '60; Art Institute of Chicago, 64th Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture '61; Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign, Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture '61, '63, '73, '74; University Art Museum, Berkeley, Funk '67; San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco Art Institute Centennial Exhibition '71; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Annual '71; James Willis Gallery, San Francisco, A Retrospective of Sculpture in the Bay Area '76; Allan Frumkin Gallery, NYC, A Bicentennial Exhibition '76; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Biennial '77.

Selected statements by

Brown:

Anonymous Was A Woman.

California Institute of the Arts (Valencia, CA) '74, p. 65+.

Art: A Woman's Sensibility.

California Institute of the Arts (Valencia, CA) '75, p. 12.

Selected bibliography about

Brown:

Leider, Philip. "Joan Brown: Her Work Illustrates the Progress of a San Francisco Mood," Artforum, vol. 1, no. 12 (June '63), p. 28+.

Coplans, John. "Circle of Styles on the West Coast," Art in America, vol. 52, no. 3 (June '64), p. 24+.

Linhares, Phil. Joan Brown: Dancers Series. San Francisco Art Institute '73.

Richardson, Brenda. Joan Brown. University Art Museum (Berkeley) '74.

Butterfield, Jan. "Joan Brown At the University Art Museum," Art in America, vol. 62, no. 3 (May-June '74), p. 113+.

Derfner, Phyllis. "New York Letter," Art International, vol. xviii, no. 10 (December '74), p. 41+.

Albright, Thomas. "Spacious Claustrophobia," Art News, vol. 74, no. 8 (October '75), p. 71+.

Martin, J. "Joan Brown: Painting and Swimming, Swimming and Painting," Allan Frumkin Gallery Newsletter, no. 2 (Fall '76), p. 1+.

Dunham, Judith L. "Joan Brown Looks at Herself," Artweek, vol. 7, no. 44 (December 18 '76), p. 1+.