

TWO COATS OF PAINT

December 16, 2020

Interview: Stalking Deborah Brown's paintings

12:51 pm by Two Coats Production



Deborah Brown, Melancholia, 2020, oil on canvas, 80 x 70 inches

Contributed by Elisabeth Condon / I've been stalking [Deborah Brown's paintings on Instagram](#), excited about a new series of still lifes. As far as I can tell they originated with [#selfportraitwithzeusandpeacockscreen](#), posted on August 3rd. The painting features dramatic black and white, pushes color out to the sides and flings pattern on canvas where needed. A cut crystal vintage vase loosely painted in red, almost scribbled in line, on a table up front takes center stage, despite stiff competition from a peacock screen. Then, on August 8th the peacock screen appeared in a mirrored self-portrait conflating interior and landscape within a mirror, as if women in canoes rowed indoors. Even later, it appears in miniature on a table top in a small painting. Curious about what she was up to, I got in touch with Debbie to find out more about the new work, which, it turns out, will be on view in a January solo show at Anna Zorina in Chelsea.



Deborah Brown, Self-Portrait with Zeus and Canoe Painting, 2020
oil on Masonite, 24 x 18 inches

Elizabeth Condon: How big is the screen? Is the screen yours, or your family's? What made you want to paint it? It has a retro, old-timey feel, and alludes to early travels, as well. What role does time play in this work, both symbolically through personal treasures and in terms of the construction of space within the composition? The screen inserts an artificial layer of space in the painting, exchanging the concave spaces of bathtubs and canoes for illusion. What are your thoughts on this? Is the screen a gateway drug to tabletops?

Deborah Brown: Before I answer specific questions about the peacock screen, I should provide a context for its appearance in my work. My recent self-portraits and still lifes came about because artist Patty Horing asked me to co-curate and participate in a show called "Sit Still: Self-Portraits in the Age of Distraction" at Anna Zorina Gallery in the summer of 2020.

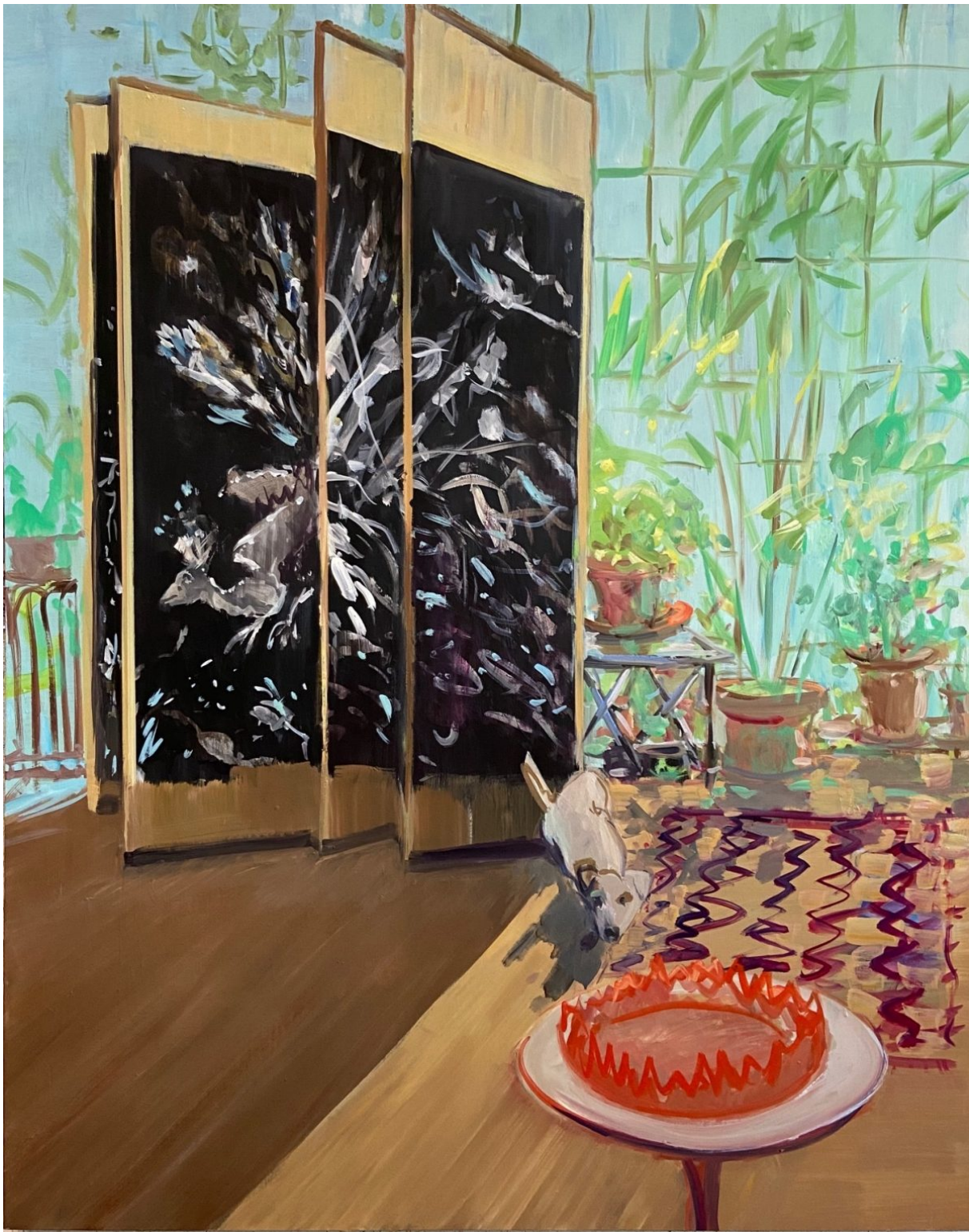
Our curation of the show coincided with the onset of the pandemic and the subsequent quarantine in New York. It seemed a perfect time to turn inward and pursue self-portraits.

At first, I depicted myself with my dog Zeus on my lap and paintings from my previous series—the nude canoeists—in the background.

As the portraits developed, I expanded the viewpoint to include the objects and furniture in my environment. At the suggestion artist Shaun Ellison, I omitted the figure to focus exclusively on the objects.

The still lifes depict furniture and objects in my possession. Most were purchased by my mother in the 50s, 60s and 70s when she traveled in Europe, Russia and Asia with my father in his capacity as a Defense Department official and a US representative to the SALT talks with the Soviets. She brought back the peacock screen from Japan, gold-leaf Buddhas from Thailand, furniture from Denmark and icons from the Athens flea market, all of which I have painted. The amazing things she bought were not expensive and reflected her own sense of what was beautiful.

Some of these objects like the carved ivory horses were given to me as gifts when my parents returned from their travels. I inherited larger items like the Arne Jacobsen egg chair. Others I collected as a child, like the kachinas, which I bought at the Department of the Interior gift shop for 50 cents each. I have been a meticulous custodian of these small collections ever since my youth. They remind me of my childhood and of my mother's taste and affinities, which are the reason I am an artist.



Deborah Brown, Peacock Screen, 2020, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

The peacock screen made a big impression on me when I was a kid. It measures 5-1/2' high and 7' wide when unfolded, and I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Later I came to think it was gaudy and kitschy. Now I no longer pass aesthetic judgment on it but see it as part of my visual history, an element that has shaped my taste. It occupies a prime spot next to a claw-foot bathtub in a room with glass block, plants and a wall hung salon-style with the work of artist friends. On the floor is a pink wool rug from Peru. The patterns of

these surfaces along with the tub have provided visual and narrative material for a suite of paintings of a bather, the bathtub and its surroundings. Bonnard's paintings have been an inspiration, but also the habits of Zeus, my Jack Russell terrier, now gone, who liked to accompany me to my bath. The first painting in this series (below) was based on Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*, in which the subject is depicted in his bath after his stabbing by Charlotte Corday. Memory, time, art history and personal narrative are all at work in my paintings depicting the peacock screen.



Deborah Brown, Bathtub Self-Portrait with Zeus 1, 2020, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches
Collection of Michel Cohen



Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Marat, 1793

EC: August 12th features the first full table-top still life, a Tulip vase, Murano glass bird and Herend china lizard cast in the vivid palette and pirouetting marks often associated with your work and reminiscent, too, of Raoul Dufy's insouciant touch. Taking a cue from the bathtub paintings, the stacked perspective at right unexpectedly yields a Persian rug, releasing the eye from the intensely hued interior.

You have often spoken of your love for French painting, and in a recent Cerebral Women interview cite Van Gogh's almond blossoms paintings as seminal to your artistic inspiration. Of Van Gogh's works, the almond blossoms paintings are more feminine than much of his work. Dufy also worked decoratively, and Matisse's love for costume has been widely established. All these men and more, such as Renoir, bring a feminine quality to painting, a quality of "luxe, calme, et volupté" that celebrates the intimacy of domestic life. Why and how is this feminine quality important to your work? You have also mentioned Lisa Yuskavage, who tweaks history painting

through kitsch. What is the role of femininity in your painting and can you say more about how casualness and mastery unite in your work toward these aims?

DB: As you point out, my work is in dialogue with French painting from the 19th and early 20th centuries, but I also draw on the work of Lovis Corinth, Andres Zorn, Max Beckmann, Winslow Homer and Velasquez. I am a devoted student of Western art history, music and literature. Manet, Degas and Matisse, but also Proust, Wagner, Richard Strauss, Flaubert, Stendahl and George Eliot, are my idols and teachers. While I do focus on the domestic with its attributes of consumption, decoration and femininity, I see my activity as a kind of psychoanalysis rather than a fetishization of my surroundings. By delving into the particulars of my environment, I hope to uncover truths that relate to the experiences of others. Domestic subject matter is a means to this end.

Re casualness vs mastery, I have struggled for most of my painting life to reign in the “editor on the shoulder” and limit the intellectual death grip of preconceived ideas about how a painting should look and how it should be made. After decades of perseverance, I have arrived at a balance between spontaneity and control that has allowed my artistic voice to emerge. I have purposely relaxed intellectual control in favor of intuition. Having gained painting skills after many years of application and effort, I believe fully in the medium as a means to articulate my feelings and ideas.

EC: On September 2nd #selfportraitwithzeusandkachinas appears in several posts. In the detail, viscous colors encircle each form, barely meet the edges of planes, yet retain extreme specificity. The dolls, housed in a cage-like structure that becomes a stage or podium on which they perform, are uninterrupted by the protagonist and her dog nestled in a huge wing chair. Book in hand, she remains impervious to the thunderous green table and the vivid yellow, red and blue dolls. The color's insane: neutral violets circle areas of lurid green, calling and responding across the contemplative space of retreat. Space sweeps back like a river on carpet, glass reflections on the table enhancing the sense of liquidity.

Can you talk about this painting, how it came about, and how you see it now? As well as the tabletop painting of kachinas and other dolls, focusing only on them? How did it feel to paint the objects? Do you time travel, or is it documentary in nature? How you assess these paintings, or do you? Because your inspirations and background encompass the western canon I wonder if you consider these genre paintings, experiments, or masterworks, which they deservedly are?

On September 12th a painting very close to the original kachina doll painting is revisited and adjusted with a more neutral palette. Is this a second version or a full reworking of the first painting?

Then September 18th, the large painting #inmemorium #household goods appears, featuring the face vase and beloved studio dog Zeus. Stylistically, its patterned curtains framing foliage seen outside echoes the stark patterns in late Matisse, as well as the period in your own work around 2016, in which figures with stylized heads a la 1930s Picasso met in interior settings.



Deborah Brown, Kachinas, 2020, oil on canvas, 48 x48 inches

First version, now destroyed



Deborah Brown, Kachinas, 2020, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

DB: This is a full reworking of the first painting you reference above. I tried to paint the kachina dolls as they are in my living room, arranged on a piece of marble inlaid with a checkerboard pattern. After the painting had sat in my studio awhile, I came to feel that the green and white pattern overwhelmed the kachinas and that the composition didn't work. I decided I wanted a more direct interaction between the figure and the kachinas. In reworking the painting, I painted out the green and white checkerboard and placed the kachinas on a neutral ground. This proved to be less confining and allowed the primary colors to have more impact. I obliterated some of the details of the dolls' costumes and features so that some would stand out more than others and the effect would be less illustrational and more painterly. As a viewer, you are looking down on the scene, placing you in the role of intruder. The figure and her dog emerge from the egg chair only after you have seen the kachinas. You are

observing someone who is engaged with a collection of objects but the relationship of the figure to the objects is unclear. I remember playing with these kachinas when I was a child, enacting dramas of pursuit and escape of my own devising. As much as I loved and played with them, I preserved them like a caretaker, and as a result I still have them today. Their presence connects me to my past and to a world I might still inhabit. Kachinas is a vehicle for me to explore these themes.

EC: On April 11th you posted one of those earlier paintings, of a woman and her dog in an interior, as if reflecting upon and also predicting a shift from the lateral, slashed marks of the women in canoes seen in the Burning in Water show, to the lines scribbled with the tip of rounded brushes now.

Did the shift in brushwork come about naturally from a change source materia, let's say painting from life? Do you work in the heat of the moment, plot the composition before letting loose, or somewhere in between, with an inkling to divide space with screen and bathtub or canoe? How do you start a painting, how long does it take to make a painting, do you work on many at once or one at a time? Do you use specific compositions and work on paper preliminarily or dive straight into canvas? What do you use as your go-to source: working from life, photography, or projection? How do the feints and jousts of color in your surfaces come to pass? How do you manage the precision of drawing with speed?

DB: Over the 5 years that I have painted the human figure, I have taken a variety of approaches to arrive where I am now. In 2013-15 I used Old Master portraits as a model, deconstructing and putting them back together in order to interpret them from a contemporary perspective.



Deborah Brown, Black Hat, 2015, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches
Collection Gail and Fred Alger

From there I did a series of paintings of women with big phallic noses inspired by Picasso's Boisgeloup portraits of Marie-Therese Walter. The painting you mention from my Instagram post of April 11 is from that series, which dates from 2016.



Deborah Brown, Loveseat, 2016, oil on canvas, 108 x 78 inches

This was the first group of portraits I did in which I began to follow my instincts of how to draw and paint the female figure. My goal was to arrive at an image that conveyed power and agency.

This series was followed by a group of paintings called "Runaways" from 2017 based on my experiences in the East Williamsburg Industrial Business Zone where I have a studio and where I found several of my dogs and

birds. I wanted to make paintings about my “adventures” and create narratives based on them. Doing these paintings, I realized the deficiencies in my ability to draw the figure in the variety of poses and attitudes I wanted to depict. I began to use a palette knife as well as a brush to construct the figures in an intentionally “outsider” mode.

Proceeding with the theme of the female protagonist, I came to view her as an adventurer, vulnerable but intrepid. Around 2018, I removed her clothes. She immediately assumed different identities—a bather, a goddess, a mythological personage or a figure from the Bible. I constructed paintings based on the multi-faceted identities I ascribed to her. Eventually my protagonist became a canoeist and a death maiden.



Deborah Brown, Danae and Zeus, 2018, oil on canvas, 70 x 80 inches



Deborah Brown, *Death Maiden 1*, 2019, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches
Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody

Throughout these many twists and turns, I experimented with different ways of painting and an increasingly large scale, but I always worked from my imagination never from photographs. I generally work on one painting at a time, seldom from drawings, and I rework constantly. I referenced the work of well-known contemporary artists like Lisa Yuskavage and Eric Fischl, who work primarily with the human figure.

In March 2020 the pandemic and quarantine hit New York. As I contemplated my next move in the studio, I was struck by the opportunity this afforded me to paint a self-portrait for “Sit Still: Self-Portraits in the Age of Distraction.” After procrastinating about how to approach the task (i.e., should I paint myself nude or as old as I really am?) I did a small painting of me and my recently deceased dog Zeus in my arms, a sincere portrait without cleverness or artifice. I ended up destroying it but my next attempt (pictured below) was more successful.



Deborah Brown, Self-Portrait with Zeus 2, 2020, oil on Masonite
Collection of Pamela and David Hornik

In the last 6 months, I have painted with speed and urgency, excited by the prospect of the unexplored territory of my body, my interior life and my immediate surroundings. My previous work had given me skill and confidence in my craft. My task now was to harness my knowledge in the service of a subject matter that required a kind of honesty and self-scrutiny that I had avoided. Some artists come early to the realization that their truth must be the subject of their work. I was glad to have come to this awareness now, rather than never. The wind was finally at my back and I was ready to do my best work and tell my own story.

EC: The ambitiously scaled #thetriumphofdeath #ocumicho #danishfacevase #kachinas, posted on September 21st, shows a tilting tabletop framed by two big lamps, their shadows inviting us to wade in. This is followed by

several posts of the painting, finalized October 5th as #blackglass #ladderrequired, wherein interior and exterior merge as ceramic and glass elements ascend to sky. Concurrently, an expansive series of #householdgoods, animals, and pillboxes appear in a steady stream of activity. Their myriad, close-to views of household chotchkes against thinly and swiftly painted grounds that indicate wood molding or brick balance brevity with the complexity of nostalgia, including #napkinrings on October 2 and #duck on October 8th.

These works show mementos of a certain class at a certain time, a genteel privilege invoked by upper-middle-class mid-20th-century American life. Can you talk about what in these mementos interest you to paint? How, given the political mood, do they resonate for you now?

The objects also resonate with ideals of womanhood and femininity and taste, defined by the privilege of having and running a home. How do you work for or against this in the paintings? The touch and color insert French painting into the Bushwick Industrial Zone; do you love, despise, mock, or honor these objects? The paintings make a space of things to project ourselves into, yet to create a feeling from such objects takes a certain dispassion—or is it passion?

DB: I believe in the unconscious, which we access by the things around us or by what we create (dreams, art, literature, music, relationships). Photos of Freud's consultation room reveal that he owned a group of archaic figurines that he displayed on a shelf while he excavated the unconscious of his patients. We surround ourselves with things that affirm us, intrigue us and reveal ourselves to ourselves. Art is no different. It offers a mirror and a window into our experience and feelings. We do not have to share a history or familiarity with an artist's subject matter in order to experience his/her/their truth. The objects in my paintings may be identified with a certain milieu, class and time, but in the context of my painting, I hope they become something that speaks to everyone. To be most effective, art must be both specific and universal. Think of the still lifes of Morandi. You don't have to be an Italian living in mid-century Bologna to feel the truth of those paintings. The objects I paint have surrounded me since I was a child. They are more than mementos. They weren't assembled to assert status or aspiration to a different class. They reflect my affinities and reveal who I am.

To make the still life paintings, I take photographs of my objects in certain arrangements, print them on letter-sized paper and tack them on my painting wall next to a blank canvas. I use the photographs in the construction of the paintings but I am not bound to copy them. In the largest of the still lifes, *Black Glass*, I have arranged the objects on a table against a gigantic curtain where they assume distinct identities and interact with one another. The large paintings always go through many revisions. I paint things in and out of the work to achieve the right balance, scale and narrative.



Deborah Brown, Black Glass, 2020, oil on canvas, 108 x 78 inches



Deborah Brown, Captain and First Mate, 2020, oil on Masonite, 24 x 18 inches
Collection of Jacob Hyman



Deborah Brown, Horse Show, 2020, oil on Masonite, 18 x 24 inches

Concurrent with the large paintings, I am doing small still lifes that feature one or two objects against a carved wooden background. I feel I have taken the greatest risk with these images because the objects depicted—marbles, icons, figurines or representations of animals—are painted to look as if they were alive. The subjects are inviting but also strange. As the viewer, you are brought into intimate proximity with them and forced to make up your mind about what they mean. The viewer realizes that the artist chose these objects and staged this interaction. Why? The most successful works in this series simultaneously attract and confuse. You cannot easily identify what feelings you are supposed to have when you look at a painting of these objects. That mystery is the source of their fascination.

“Deborah Brown: Things As They Are,” [Anna Zorina](#), 532 West 24 Street, New York, NY. January 7 to February 13, 2021.

About the author: [Elisabeth Condon](#) is an LA-born painter based in New York and Florida. Since receiving her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1989, she has received numerous awards, grants, and fellowships from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, Pulse New York, and Pollock Krasner Foundation, among others.

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