

Albany native's vibrant return in solo Opalka exhibit

By [Tresca Weinstein](#)

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Judith Braun



Black and white lines, graphite and charcoal, splashes of bright neon color. With these few, carefully curated elements, artist Judith Braun evokes depths of space, emotion and allusion.

The Albany native's solo exhibition at the Opalka Gallery, titled "My Pleasure," includes paintings, cubic sculptures and wall murals, most of which were created using a system she calls "Symmetrical Procedures," in which each line is copied in reverse. But the products of this precise methodology are the opposite of rigid — they practically vibrate with energy and expressiveness.

"I like systems and patterns and steps, where you start with a simple line and you build and build and build," Braun explained in a recent interview. "When I set up these parameters, then I know what I'm investigating and experimenting with. It's a system that is guaranteed to keep producing ideas."

The show, which runs through April 23, features a group of paintings, created during the pandemic, that grew out of this process, while at the same time representing a departure of sorts for the artist. During the past year, her signature graphical images began to morph into the first representational pieces she had made since her period of early figurative work in the 1980s, after earning her MFA from the University at Albany.

"I was doing my small drawings, and the circle I was working with looked like it could be a head," Braun recalled. "I put some circles inside that circle and it looked like eyes. I didn't want to get into making self-portraits, but at the same time, I like when I feel a little uncomfortable. I can say now that maybe it was because it was the pandemic and I was alone, and it asserted my existence to make big heads."

Translated into large-scale paintings on raw canvas, the personifications burst with feeling. Hot pink and glowing white tears explode or slowly drip over the grids and patterns of the minimalist faces, alluding to the global challenges of the past two years as well as to Braun's own journey as a breast cancer survivor. The tension between hard lines and soft curves,

humor and pathos, whimsy and restraint, reflects the marriage of structure and intuition in the artist's work. That fusion shows up in the title of the show itself: The word "pleasure" is inherently lush and suggestive, but add "my" in front of it, and it becomes crisper, more elegant and austere.

It's a dichotomy that Braun herself gracefully embodies. With her cropped salt-and-pepper hair and oversize pink-framed glasses (which make an appearance in the exhibition), she looks every inch the New York City artist. That's what she was until 2018, when she returned to her hometown after a 25-year career in the city that encompassed numerous national and international exhibitions, grant-funded projects and private commissions from the likes of the Bloomberg Foundation, Lululemon and Mazda. Braun's papers are archived in the "Collection of Downtown New York Artists of the 1980-90s" at the Fales Library at New York University, and she was featured on Bravo's reality TV show "Work of Art" in 2010. In May, her work will be included in the group exhibition "11 Women of Spirit," at Zürcher Gallery in Manhattan.

There was a time, however, when Braun thought that she was done making art. After a break of close to nine years, it was insight, in the form of a Tarot reading, that brought her back to her path, and it was the logic of her symmetrical approach that kept her there.

"I was choosing rules and then following them and believing they would keep opening up new possibilities, and a whole new tangent of my life and work opened up," she said. Braun's wall murals, concentric circles marked with the fingertips of both hands, are an exemplification of this balance between instinct and organization. Slowly fading as they spiral, they highlight the transient nature of both their materials and their maker.

"When I'm doing the fingerprint work with charcoal, using my symmetrical body that's also made of carbon, it can't be more primal and basic than that," the artist said. "And there's the fact that they are ephemeral, made to be erased afterwards."

The mural in "My Pleasure," made live early in the show's run, contrasts with a 1993 installation also included in the exhibition, assembled with numerous individual sheets of 8.5-by-11 photocopy paper. Those sharp corners are mirrored in more recent work: a grouping of 10 wooden cubes, painted in black and white, that can be used as seating. The show also features a wall of text; Braun likes to integrate words that convey double meanings, often edgy, provocative language that juxtaposes with her typically cool and collected work. It all emerges from the rigorous yet open-ended rules she's laid down for herself, like walls enclosing an infinite playground.

"Freedom through discipline is a philosophical way of looking at how to proceed in my life and my art," she said. "The best analogy I've come up with is music, like the piano—there's a [certain number of] keys and you can look at all the possibilities, and no one has ever thought of that as a limitation."

Written By

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Tresca Weinstein writes about dance, visual art, and culture for the Times Union. She also writes, edits, and manages content for national corporations and organizations, with a focus on the arts, yoga, health and wellness, and positive psychology. Her favorite part of her job is talking to people who are passionate about making the world a better and more awe-inspiring place, whether that means creating beautiful things, researching the science of happiness, or doing eight pirouettes in a row.