

WOMEN ARTISTS

**Selected Works
from the Collection**

**Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art
Cornell University**

Women Artists News
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Nancy Brett—Recent Paintings

Harm Bouckaert Gallery
100 Hudson Street, NYC
March 3-March 27

So much of the abstract painting being done now is simply mannerism; dressing up the ideas of older artists in new shapes and colors. Nancy Brett will have none of this; she concentrates on working through some of the mind-twisting problems that less daring artists avoid. One of these is the effort, most notably undertaken by Philip Guston in representational style, to elevate the cartoon to high seriousness. Brett continues this experiment in the abstract oil paintings she is exhibiting at Harm Bouckaert Gallery in Tribeca. There is humor in Brett's simply painted shapes; a bumpy black form is a child's idea of a mountain range, while another looks like a cartoonist's depiction of someone fighting his way out of a black bag. Brett uses many attributes of the comic-strip to create high tension between

a deceptive playfulness and the suggestion that something dark and diabolical is occurring, as in *Vagabond Moon* where mysterious mountains lean over and nudge each other in the shadows.

Brett also takes considerable risks in exacerbating the tension between naturalistic space and flatness. Forms are modelled with shading and highlights to appear three-dimensional, while their frontality and sharpness of outline keep them in a two-dimensional design. The result is disorienting and problematic, but endows her work with nervousness and freshness.

Tijuana, an 83" by 78" oil painting (Brett's switch from acrylic to oil is a good) move for her) contains a light-filled rectangle that might be a doorway to a new and pleasant place. Like De Kooning's *Door to the River* (perhaps his most mystical painting), Brett's image is an invitation to the viewer to cross the threshold, and in the stylistic inventiveness of her work, Brett is endeavoring to do just that. —**Diana Morris**

Welcome." It became "a very compelling image" with its red bricks and blue windows. She bicycled past the church every day on her way to her studio, and eventually developed this work. She sees it as symbolic of her "travel in space and time and emotion. . . . It was one of the first pieces I ever did, so it was the beginning. Maybe it's the beginning of the traveling away from design." LF

1. Statement by Brandford in interview, October 31, 1983.
2. Brandford, in Dorothy Dodge, "Joanne Brandford's Weaving is an Art," Boston Globe, November 29, 1974.
3. Brandford, interview.
4. Betty Park, "Joanne Segal Brandford-Nets," Fiberarts Magazine, May/June 1978, 18.
5. Joanne Brandford, "My Way of Working," Kunsthandverk, 9/10, 1983, 31.
6. Ibid.
7. This statement by Brandford and all succeeding ones are from the interview.

NANCY BRETT (b. 1946)
American

Nancy Brett was born in Jackson, Michigan, in 1946. She remembers drawing when she was three years old, but it was not until college that she studied art formally.¹ In 1969 she received a B.F.A. from Wayne State University in Detroit, and in 1972 she completed an M.F.A. at Cranbrook Academy of Art, also in Michigan. She describes her student work as figurative paintings. In the early 1970's her works were exhibited in Michigan in shows featuring local artists.

Brett moved to New York, for its museums and galleries provided a "better artistic dialogue and more creative opportunities." She soon began a subtractive phase in her work, changing from figurative to abstract painting. Robert Rauschenberg inspired her efforts. She said, "he gave license to my generation to explore images and materials." She agrees with his statement that "painting relates to both art and life; neither can be created."² Brett may plan what she has to paint and may see the image hovering about the canvas, but once the wet paint touches the canvas, "it moves without preconception." She believes that the artist must listen to the paint. The final image simply happens, always evolving differently from its original conception.

Brett's most minimal, frontal paintings, were shown in exhibitions at the Ericson Gallery, New York City ("Painting as Percept," 1980), and the Herbert J. Johnson Museum ("Painting Up Front," 1981). In these shows she was grouped with other major contemporary frontalist painters. After the exhibition at the Johnson Museum, she abandoned oils for acrylics, and changed her focus from two images to one image, on a ground. Her works exhibited in

1982 (Harm Bouckaert Gallery, New York City) "appeared to stress the autonomy of shapes."³

Brett's current work is in an additive phase, depicting the real world as "still frontal, but with a real sense of space." She goes to the country every summer for inspiration, gathering ideas from nature that sustain her throughout the forthcoming year in New York City.

8. Zigzag, 1980

Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 68

Gift of the artist, 83.66

Zigzag appeared in both "Painting as Percept" and "Painting Up Front." The ground is chalky peach, the left form is chalky green, and the right one is burnt orange. The coloration becomes more complicated, however, for other darker colors (green, blue, purple, and red) seem to bleed through the opaque ground and forms, and seep out toward the edges of the canvas. The shapes have a rough, sketchy quality, and face each other with saw-toothed edges.

In Zigzag, as in Brett's other frontal paintings, the focus is on the tension between forms, and on their active relationship with the ground. The main characteristic of these paintings is a completely frontal surface, without any suggestion of depth. There is usually a single image, sometimes two, on a ground; figure and ground are of equal importance. The particular combination of colors and forms energizes the painting.⁴ Brett forces her color to act and react, rather than to decorate the canvas. Her large canvases cause the spectator to notice not only their inner smoldering energy, but also their relationships with the wall on which they hang.

Zigzag was not the original title. Brett changed it from Sidesaddle just before the opening of the "Painting Up Front" exhibition, because she thought that Zigzag better described the painting. She wants her titles to echo the work, to verbalize the visual. KM

1. This statement and following ones by Brett are from a telephone interview, October 12, 1983.
2. Dore Ashton, American Art Since 1945, New York, 1982, 71.
3. Valentin Tetransky, "Nancy Brett," Arts Magazine, LVI, May 1982, 6.
4. Thomas W. Leavitt, Painting Up Front, exh. cat., Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York, 1981, introduction.

BARBARA VAN DEN BROECK (ca. 1560-after 1590)
Dutch

Barbara van den Broeck was born in Antwerp around 1560. She learned engraving from Jan Collaert the Elder and her father, Crispin van den Broeck, an illustrator. Her known works are seven engravings of biblical,