

JOAN BROWN (1938-1990)

Bay Area painter Joan Brown is given her moment in the limelight in a retrospective at the San Jose Museum of Art. Writer Mark Van Proyen reflects on her art, life, and times.

Two decades ago, you could say that Joan Brown and I were next-door neighbors. We didn't live near each other, but we did teach at the same time in adjacent rooms at UC Berkeley's Kroeber Hall, my class being an introduction to color and composition, and hers an advanced figure drawing class. One day during the spring of 1990, Joan approached me in the hallway that connected our two rooms to ask a question about an interview that I did with Wally Hedrick some years earlier. In that interview, Hedrick made a comment that compared the reserved personality of Jay DeFeo (who was his ex-wife), with that of Joan's "cheerleader" personality, implying that to be the explanation for Joan's greater art world success and visibility.

Understandably, Joan wanted to set the record straight, and she suggested that Hedrick went out of his way to encourage the legend of a rivalry between the two women even though he should have known that no such rivalry actually existed. Joan and Jay were never the best of friends, although they were also next-door neighbors for a short time in 1958-59 (at 2322 Fillmore—the building where Jay painted *The Rose*); but they were friends, and friends for a very long time, owing to the deep mutual respect they shared for each other's work. But their lives moved in different directions after Joan gave birth to her son Noel in 1962. Two years later, Jay also gave another kind of

birth to *The Rose*, and then fell into *La Vie Boheme* for five years, finally regaining her bearings in about 1970, when she resumed painting after a post-*Rose* hiatus.

These were difficult times for both artists. Earlier, both had received major attention, with Jay being included in a group exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1959, and Joan having several solo exhibitions at the Staempfli Gallery in New York during the years that followed. Joan was also prominently featured in Peter Selz's landmark exhibition from 1967 titled "Funk" at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, and in fact had created the work (titled *Fur Rat*, from 1962) that caused her second husband, Manuel Neri, to first use the term insofar as the visual arts are concerned, proclaiming the work to be "really funky." Neither Jay nor Wally had work in that show, and no doubt they should have been included, but it does seem plausible that Hedrick may have had an ax to grind about that exclusion.

Needless to say, the art world changed quite a bit between 1967 and 1970. Joan and Jay had been quite successful a decade earlier, but since that time, both artists had fallen out of the local limelight. But when the Feminist Art movement became visible in North America in the mid-1970s, Joan and Jay were proclaimed as early trailblazers



"FUR RAT," 1962
WOOD, CHICKEN WIRE, RACCOON FUR
20½" x 54" x 12"
PHOTO: COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
BERKELEY ART MUSEUM
AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE; GIFT OF THE ARTIST

whose careers could be held up as models for younger women. Neither of them were comfortable with that status. Granted, both were teachers who by all accounts were inspirations to their students, but as Joan once pointed out, "I had women teachers too. Sonia Gechtoff was an early influence, although not as important as Elmer (Bischoff)."

All of this might be worth remembering when we look at the current exhibition of Joan's paintings titled "This Kind of Bird Flies Backward: Paintings by Joan Brown," at the San Jose Museum of Art (through March 11, 2012). In an essay that is part of the exhibition's online catalog, curator Jodi Throckmorton points to how Joan's work foreshadowed the Pattern and Decoration movement, as well as the use of domestic imagery that was later embraced by many feminist artists. Although the essay acknowledges that Joan was resistant to the attempts by feminists to recuperate her work to their cause, she persists in focusing on Joan's importance in relation to that context, presuming that her canny anticipation of other subsequent developments in art (such as New Image Painting and Pop Surrealism) have already been given adequate analysis. But the one aspect of Joan's work that has not been adequately addressed is the one that is stunningly obvious, that being Joan's unique contribution to the long and complicated history of the self-portrait.

By my reckoning, Joan is among the very few well-known painters who have executed over 50 self-portraits in a career, putting her in a group that includes Rembrandt, Frida Kahlo, and not too many others. Van Gogh only painted 37, and even though we can say that Albrecht Durer founded the self-portrait as a stand-alone genre, he painted no more than a dozen. Rembrandt painted 75, capturing his own likeness throughout his long life. Similarly, Joan also captured many different aspects of her own visage. In fact, about half of the 44 works in this exhibition are self-portraits of various kinds, including several that celebrate Joan's athletic accomplishments and others that commemorate her spiritually motivated journeys to far-off lands (she died in the fall of 1990, at age 52, in an accident during a trip to India).

These works are all unique in the way that they contain and naturalize a host of subtle psychological contradictions. Sometimes, Joan could be gregarious, while at others she was painfully shy. In turns, she could be self-conscious while at others she could be utterly guileless. Always generous, she also guarded her private time as if it were the most precious of resources. She was a mystery to herself, and like anyone who pays close attention to one's self, she couldn't help but wonder if there was any real there there. Indeed, in many of the self-portraits, we see faces that are placid and pensive, but when we look closely we can detect clouds of self-doubt hovering nearby. At the same time, we can also see that Joan was fully aware of herself as a distinct type of person, and as such, she had no problem in caricaturing herself as an absurd protagonist of a story that could be called the trials, tribulations and triumphs of the lady painter.

—MARK VAN PROYEN

"SELF-PORTRAIT," 1977
OIL ENAMEL ON CANVAS, 90" x 72"
COLLECTION OF SANDRA SHANNONHOUS
PHOTO: COURTESY OF SAN JOSE MUESUM OF ART

"GIRL IN WATER HOLDING ONTO POLE," 1962
OIL ON CANVAS, 72½" x 72½"
PRIVATE COLLECTION
PHOTO: COURTESY HACKETT I MILL, SAN FRANCISCO

