

Gallery Paule Anglim

frieze

Joan Brown

by Jonathan Griffin

Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco



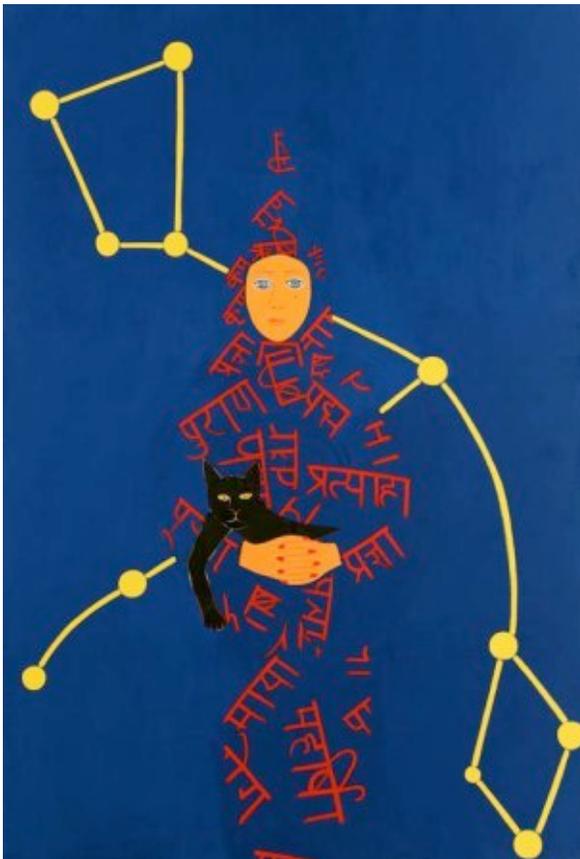
In 1957, at the age of 18, Joan Brown had her first exhibition of paintings in San Francisco's 6 Gallery, where two years previously Allen Ginsberg had first given a reading of his poem *Howl* (1955). It was the advent of the Beat movement, and Brown came of age at its epicentre. Despite her remarkably swift success, she distanced herself from her early expressionist technique the following decade, tackling her subsequent paintings with a renewed degree of finesse and control. As this bifurcated exhibition of works from the mid-1970s and early 1980s makes plain, Brown reinvented herself throughout her career.

What remained consistent was Brown's commitment to certain subject matter: self-portraits, pictures of her son and other family members, and scenes from the domestic life of a female artist. Animals – cats and dogs especially – appear often, as spirit guides or mystic symbols. In middle age, she was increasingly drawn to comparative religion, especially after a trip to India in 1980 where she met the yogic guru Sathya Sai Baba at his ashram outside Bangalore. It was whilst building an obelisk in his honour, in Bangalore, in 1990, that Brown and an assistant were killed when a concrete

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turret collapsed on them. She was 52.

The story of Brown's artistic life is a study in clarity of vision versus obscurantism, of idealistic intentions versus often-wayward effect. For many people, myself included, the period of her work that is most enthralling occurred during the last decade of her life, which also happens to be the time when Brown was least personally accessible in her art, when she receded further into her esoteric metaphysical and spiritual beliefs. 'The ancient cultures,' she wrote in 1985, 'foretold that a Golden Age will recur. It will be a peaceful time when all creatures on earth will live in perfect harmony. We are now at the dawn of this Aquarian Age.' Personally, I think this is bananas, but I am grateful that Brown's beliefs were responsible for paintings such as *Year of the Tiger* (1983), easily the most original work in this exhibition.



Year of the Tiger is a mood-board of New Age iconographies, with Brown herself at the centre, looking slightly stunned. She is surrounded by Theosophist thought-forms (copied from Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater's 1901 book on the subject), astrological signs (Leo and Aquarius), a wheel showing the creatures of the Chinese Zodiac, an ancient Egyptian woman in the crab yoga position, and two black cats, glaring from their perches atop jazzily patterned columns. Floating against a field of blue, nothing overlaps or interrelates except for the tip of Brown's paintbrush which strokes the Egyptian woman's foot. While the relative significances of these ancient (and not so ancient) symbols might have been apparent to the artist, 30-something years later, the picture strikes me as a cruel testament to Brown's unjoined-up (if earnest) thinking.

Year of the Tiger works, however, because I detect in Brown's eyes a glimmer of mild panic at the vastness of the ideas with which she was wrestling. The other post-1980 painting in the exhibition, *Summer Solstice* (1982), is weirder, but harder to empathize with. Brown appears dressed in a cloak and conical hat formed from Sanskrit writing, holding a black cat in her lap. The costume, from which only Brown's face and hands emerge, is a kind of painterly cloak of invisibility. Without revealing what any of the text actually means, Brown is hiding behind the appearance of meaning, either unwilling or unable to share it.

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As with most of her late works, these two paintings are done in a graphic style that is almost childishly illustrational. Brown's paintings from the early years of the 1970s, which make up the rest of this show, could hardly be more different. Although they, too, depict female figures against plain backgrounds, they are not self-portraits but model studies, as their titles affirm. Most, like *Dark Pink Nude* (1974), show bodies as pink silhouettes against formless black; in the two most powerful, *Figure with Aura* and *The Lovers # 2* (both 1973), Brown gives the silhouettes active, fuzzy borders – in the latter instance, a red and white stripe – which make them pulse against the void.

These figure studies succeed on terms that the later paintings do not: they are direct in their intentions, and they pack a punch in the way that Francis Bacon – or, closer to Brown's generation, Susan Rothenberg and Nancy Spero – can, and do. *Year of the Tiger* and *Summer Solstice* are paintings that, perhaps, do not quite know what they are, or what they want to do, but in the company of an artist as accomplished as Brown was in the 1980s, it is rare and exciting to be led into the unknown.

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