

Critic's Choice Joan Brown paintings at CB1-G gallery turn ordinary people into poignant stories of intrigue



Detail of "Woman Waiting in a Theatre Lobby" by Joan Brown on view at George Adams Gallery at CB1-G in Los Angeles. (Joan Brown Estate / George Adams Gallery)

By **David Pagel**

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“Joan Brown Herself: Paintings and Constructions, 1970-80” brings together nine great paintings and two wonderful sculptures that Brown made from 1970 to 1980. At George Adams Gallery's show at CB1-G, the straightforward show is at once enchanting and matter of fact.

Nothing fancy animates the powerful pictures of the San Francisco painter (1938-1990), whose work gets more riveting with time. The people in Brown's enamels on canvas are utterly ordinary — regular women, children and men going about their lives or stopping to pose for a picture, back when posing for pictures meant something special.

Most depict individuals, staring out at viewers as if they are surprised to see us and even more startled to know that we are paying attention to them. That sense of humility gives Brown's art its warmth and depth. It makes each figure she paints, including herself as a child, a mom and an artist, seem like someone you'd like to meet, maybe even get to know.

A subtle undercurrent of discontent percolates beneath the surfaces of Brown's paintings. This causes each figure to be even more intriguing. Although none seems uncomfortable in her skin, none seems self-confident or self-satisfied. Self-doubt is Brown's specialty, and she delivers it with bittersweet poignancy.

The people she portrays also appear to be acutely aware that they are out of sync with their surrounding, that their lives have not measured up to the dreams they had for themselves. That sadness is balanced against the knowledge that things could be worse. Self-restraint trumps self-indulgence in Brown's paintings, which know a thing or two about mental toughness.

Her sculptures are more informal. Made of cardboard boxes that she has drawn on, cut apart, painted and then wired together, "Luxury Liner" resembles a child's toy from the old days, and "Smoker" looks like a kid's rendition of an ancient portrait bust, perhaps seen in a museum.

Real innocence — and real wisdom — suffuses all of Brown's art.

George Adams Gallery at CB1-G, 1923 S. Santa Fe Ave., Los Angeles, (212) 564-8480, through April 23. Closed Sundays and Mondays. cb1gallery.com/cb1-g/

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