

ARTFORUM

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Joan Brown, *The Cosmic Nurse*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 96 1/2 x 79".

Joan Brown

ANGLIM GILBERT GALLERY

When the goings-on in contemporary San Francisco weigh heavily on the conscience, a reexamination of the work of the city's earlier visionaries can provide a fleeting moment of relief. The painter Joan Brown was born in the Bay Area in 1938 and lived there until her tragic death in 1990. Selections from her oeuvre were recently on view at Anglim Gilbert

Anglim Gilbert Gallery

Gallery, located in the new Minnesota Street Project gallery complex—just over a mile from the recently constructed Golden State Warriors stadium and surrounded by garish property developments that threaten to erase the neighborhood’s industrial and working-class roots. Brown might not recognize these streets at all, but the chimera-like women and owl-like cats of her canvases fiercely haunt her former domain.

Alongside selected figural pieces from Brown’s thirty-two-year career, “The Authentic Figure” presented never-before-exhibited works on paper the artist made in the 1970s, while her painting practice was undergoing a dramatic shift in technique. Instead of the impastoed swirls of oils with which she made a name for herself in the prior decade, she began to apply thin, solid layers of enamel paint to her canvases, often using the hues straight out of the can. During this period of introspection, Brown routinely drew the nude female figure (sometimes her own) from life, as she had while a San Francisco Art Institute student. The earliest study in the show, *Model in Environment*, 1957, dated to those heady post-AbEx days: Though the work apparently portrays a live model, the beaming lady, seated and strangely foreshortened, bears an uncanny resemblance to the subject of de Kooning’s *Woman I*, 1950–52. Her torso, made of a solid mass of charcoal marks, is inscrutable. Brown’s works on paper from the early ’70s, which hung together on the side of the gallery opposite *Model in Environment*, could not have been more dissimilar. Drawings such as *Model with Painting* and *Model with Table Bottom*, both 1973, demonstrated her newfound allegiance to line and her simplified approach to color, formal qualities that would come to define the rest of her output, along with a turn to the spiritual.

Though these drawings provided the occasion for the exhibition, the few large paintings in the show dominated the small gallery both in size and in interest. Esoteric symbolism and feline imagery proliferated. Brown, who in 1969 took care of and fed sixteen cats at once, considered the animal her alter ego. *Half Cat*, an enamel-on-wood wall-hung relief from 1981, made literal the connection between woman and feline, bestowing a vertically split, half-human, half-cat head on a single symmetrical body. *Harmony*, a self-portrait painted a year later, spliced the right side of the artist, hand brandishing a paintbrush, to the left side of a curiously bipedal orange tabby. *Bather #7*, 1982, depicted a feline body with a human head. One of its paws holds a jar, out of which escapes a golden snake. Another painting, *Summer Solstice*, 1982, showed the artist cradling a black cat and clad in a cloak of Sanskrit words. Brown’s spiritualism derives partially from theosophy—a practice that brings together the icons and ideas of many ancient cultures—and partially from extended study of Chinese and Egyptian artifacts. The universal and the particular butt up against each other in her equivocally symbolic tableaux.

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In Camille Paglia's 1990 book *Sexual Personae*, the controversial scholar writes, while discussing the ancient Egyptian worship of the feline, that "cats have secret thoughts, a divided consciousness. No other animal is capable of ambivalence." Brown's best work embraces such irresolution, offering possibilities instead of answers. *The Cosmic Nurse*, 1978, shows a cat biting the hem of a woman's white medical uniform as the attendant walks through a plane of vibrating daubs of red, pink, green, and white acrylic. Is the animal holding her back from her destination, or is the nurse pulling the cat along with her? Who is the medic headed to heal? The city of San Francisco could certainly use her help.

— Canada Choate