

Drawing, as Means and End

CECILY BROWN'S FIRST WEST COAST EXHIBITION, AND THE FIRST FOCUSED ON THE ARTIST'S DRAWINGS, TAKES OVER THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, IN A SOFT-SPOKEN BUT POWERFUL WAY

By Josef Woodard,
News-Press Correspondent



'Cecily Brown: Rehearsal'

When: through June 3

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, 653 Paseo Nuevo

Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday through Sunday

Information: 966-5373, mcasantabarbara.org

Too often, the art of drawing is relegated to second class citizenry status in the fine arts world, viewed as a preliminary draft (as in "draftsmanship") — means towards the presumably larger ends of creating a painting, sculpture or even a skyscraper. That dismissal of a noble medium gets a bold refuting with the new Museum of Contemporary Arts exhibition "Cecily Brown: Rehearsal," in which the expressive might and exploratory intrigue of her drawings can't be taken lightly or dismissed as a fleeting sketch on the path to fruition in another medium. But she doesn't manage this

feat by creating fastidious, intricate or otherwise neatly resolved drawings, instead marshalling the strength in her fuzzy margins and widely varying degrees of finish. In some way, it is a show powered by curious relationships, between abstraction vs. representation, of art historical echoes (from Bosch to a Jimi Hendrix album cover) vs. her clearly contemporary sensibility, and other subtle frictions warming up the place.

Her drawings speak for themselves — softly but powerfully — and force us to ask questions even as we bask in the oblique beauty of what she's up to. The term "Rehearsal" is a clever play on the stereotyped view of drawing, as an artistic form of practice, while referring to the French term "rehercier," a means of dwelling on and refining an idea, in search of deeper meaning.

MCASB's show, curated by Claire Gilman, senior curator at the Drawing Center, NY, is the first devoted specifically to the drawings of Ms. Brown, and the first solo show by the artist on the West Coast. London-born and New York-based, the artist is best known for her paintings, which,



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Cecily Brown, MCASB gallery shot of her show "Rehearsal."

like these drawings, dip tentacles into the work and resonance of well-known artists of old, often with a feminist filter and her personalized pastiche method of image-making and mangling.

At MCASB, the relative

quiet of the show as a general presence in the gallery runs counter to the energized character of her art, on closer scrutiny. At times, she veers towards abstract expressionist tactics, as with the large Untitled

piece — powered by grey-blue hues — across the gallery from the knotty thicketed tangles of

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Cecily Brown, Untitled (Paradise) — blue-ish image, abstract and landscape-related...



Cecily Brown, Untitled (Ladyland) — with group of lounging women, based on Hendrix' Electric Ladyland album art.



Cecily Brown, Untitled Combing the Hair (Beach)

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“Untitled (After Bosch).” That large work hangs next to the sparer airier image “Untitled (After Bosch and Boldini),” with fleeting, unfinished impressions of bird and animal life, and a nude in the pictorial mix.

Art historicity rears her head in multiple directions in the show, and in sly ways — reverential and otherwise. Ms. Brown is an artist who openly confesses to the unavoidable influence and imprint of art from the past, and is grappling with that legacy in public. Wispy hints of genteel antiquity appear in “Strolling Actresses (After Hogarth)” (the 18th century draughtsman William Hogarth, a partner in drawing crime).

Rapscallion and peasant figures seem to have been airlifted out of the deliciously profane domain of Breughel in “Carnival and Lent (After Breughel),” in which the sparse ink-on-paper imagery is in stark contrast with the crazed, fleshy density of Breughel’s paintings.

She riffs on the art — and the art history tradition — of sensuous hair-combing, with the three smaller pieces titled “Combing her Hair (After Degas),” and the fuller, larger “Coming the Hair (Beach).”

Fast forwarding a century and change and shifting from supposedly the vicinities of high and low/pop culture, Ms. Brown lavishes upon us a crowd of nude “ladies” borrowed from the distinctive cover art of Hendrix’s “Electric Ladyland.” Fragments of animalia are teasingly flown into some of the images, alternately called “Ladyland” and “bestiary.”

In the back gallery, amidst the muskier atmosphere of dark-painted walls, the artist shows work leaning more in the direction of nude studies and elliptical erotica. The looser broad-broad lines of “Untitled (After Knox Martin)” contrasts with the retro-sexual gaming of her images in the series “Untitled (After Jeux de dames cruelles).” Based on a rather infamous collection of vintage photographs detailing sadomasochist erotic



Cecily Brown, *Untitled (After Bosch and Boldini)*, and *Untitled (After Bosch)*.

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situations, Ms. Brown’s works mostly resist explicit imagery and instead adopt a style of hazy, fragmentary carnality.

Also, in the “back room,” we find an anomaly from the rest of the exhibition, an image drawn on actual stationary from the

Washington D.C.’s Henley Park Hotel, a winking nod to the easily-available sketch reputation of drawing. Done in ballpoint pen and crayon, this rough-hewn image finds a woman in bed, presumably having a dense dream manifested by a

whirlwind of mostly-abstracted visual stimuli above her head.

We might reasonably read the image as a self-portrait of the artist, with an active, art history-hopping dream life captured — or at least interpreted — on paper.