

ARTFORUM

Joan Brown

GEORGE ADAMS GALLERY



Joan Brown, *Model with Reflection in Window*, 1972, acrylic, ink, and graphite on paper, 36 × 24".

sensuous oil painting of a bare-skinned girl who unflinchingly meets the viewer's gaze, the Frenchman's models were rarely mentioned by name. Yet a number of Brown's, such as the one depicted in *Mary Julia #29*, 1976—a sweet portrait of a lady in crimson heels and a yellow polka-dot dress—are named, implying that the subject could have been a friend of the artist's. Nonetheless, like the faceless woman of *Model with Paint Brushes*, 1973, Mary Julia is oddly cipherlike and deindividualized, as if she were just another pretty object on display in a tastefully appointed room (the chamber's dark carpeting is printed with a bold floral pattern—one that wouldn't appear too out of place in an interior by Matisse).

Yet *Model + Artist*, *Model + Mirror in Studio*, and *Model with Reflection in Window*, all 1972, indicate that Brown is looking inward on a journey of self-discovery. In the first drawing, the sitter leans her head on her right hand, the traditional pose of melancholy,

"Drawn from Life: Works on Paper, 1970–1976" was a modest but illuminating survey of drawings by the late Bay Area painter Joan Brown (1938–1990). The eighteen works featured at George Adams Gallery—done primarily in ink, acrylic, and graphite—highlighted a major turning point in the artist's career: namely, the transition Brown made from creating heavily impastoed and expressionistic figurative paintings to producing flatter and more stylized depictions of women—images that are implicitly self-referential and, for the most part, nude. Many are conspicuously linear, not to say deftly Minimal, among them *Figure #13*, *Figure #25*, and *Figure #39*, all 1970—clearly "breakthrough" pieces in their utter eschewal of luscious painterly facture.

There is nothing overtly sexual about Brown's subjects, however much the pink nudes of *Model in Studio* and *Model with Table with Wheels*, both 1973, hold the picture plane with their voluptuous streamlined forms, suggesting a certain affinity with Matisse's flattened portrayals of women. With the exception of *Carmelina*, 1903, an unabashedly

dating at least to Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, 1514. In the second and third pictures, two other women observe their reflections. Perhaps they are in need of mirroring—or empathic acceptance, according to psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's definition—which is essential for the “restoration of the [damaged, unhappy] self.” However, in *Model with Stripes*, 1971, conceivably the bleakest, most emotionally charged work in the exhibition (and implicitly a self-portrait, for Brown projects herself into the subject), the dejected figure confronts the viewer in all her misery. Her pale, rough-hewn face resembles a death mask; her eyes are sullen, empty. She stares vacantly into space, communicating a sense of life's meaninglessness.

Certainly the drawings were made at a time of extreme disquiet and flux. Brown's father was an alcoholic, and her mother often threatened suicide (which she ultimately committed, just six weeks after the artist's father died of a heart attack). And immediately before her wedding to her first husband, Brown became seriously physically ill. She eventually sought a cure by befriending an Indian guru—one wonders if he functioned as a substitute father for her. Again, *Model with Stripes* is a daring and insightful self-representation, for only in the mirror of art was the artist able to truly see herself and heal the wound her narcissistic parents inflicted on her. As Hungarian-British writer Arthur Koestler espoused, art can be a crucial form of self-repair.

— *Donald Kuspit*