

GLOWING COLORS

Cecily Brown next to a work in progress in her Manhattan studio. "Obviously showing at the Met is a huge deal," Brown says. "I have complete imposter syndrome.... I can't quite believe it, still."



Outside the Lines

Once known for her risqué canvases, Cecily Brown brings vibrant life to paintings about death—and vanity and shipwrecks, among other things—in a wide-ranging show at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

BY CAROL KINO PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTORIA HELY-HUTCHINSON

ONE REASON the British-born artist Cecily Brown, 53, came to New York in 1994 was that she wanted to paint, and in the London of Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst, with their fried-egg-and-kebab sculptures and sharks in formaldehyde, that urge was regarded as rather retrograde. But the other reason was, as she says, “I’m a nepo baby in London, and here people don’t know so much that my dad was a big cheese.”

At 21, while a student at the Slade School of Fine Art, Brown learned that a longtime family friend, the renowned British critic and curator David Sylvester, was actually her father, courtesy of a long-ago affair he’d had with her mother, the novelist Shena Mackay. Sylvester had always been interested in Brown’s painting, introducing her to famous artists like Jasper Johns and Richard Serra and taking her to see a show with Francis Bacon, whose work he’d championed for decades, curating exhibitions and publishing a book of their interviews. In art school, Brown recalls, “Bacon was the reigning king, and [Sylvester’s] interviews with Bacon were pretty famous among art students.” But in New York, she says, Sylvester’s “name doesn’t necessarily ring a bell, which I think was one of the main reasons I wanted to live here.... The art world here just felt so much bigger.”

Before Sylvester’s 2001 death, Brown says, he predicted that people would someday remember

him as “Cecily Brown’s father.” Now, more than a quarter century after she moved to New York, Brown is sitting in her airy studio near Union Square, discussing her upcoming show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Running April 4 through December 3, *Death and the Maid* will be her first career retrospective in the U.S. Though Brown has been an art-world celebrity for much of that time, and she’s one of a small group of women whose work commands seven figures, she says that the exhibition has her nervous. “Obviously showing at the Met is a huge deal,” she says. “I have complete imposter syndrome. You know, I just keep thinking, I can’t quite believe it, still.”

Over the past five years or so, the Met has increasingly devoted space to solo shows by living artists, including retrospectives of Kerry James Marshall, David Hockney and Vija Celmins and facade commissions by Wangechi Mutu and Hew Locke. “They do show a lot of contemporary art now,” Brown says. “Of course, in my head, there [are] always the haters saying, ‘Now, what’s she doing there?’”

Max Hollein, the director of the Met, says that Brown’s deep understanding of the history of painting makes her a strong fit for the museum. And, he points out, over the course of her career, painting has continued to evolve dramatically, shifting between abstraction, conceptualism and figuration. “She’s been someone who has basically pushed the medium, but [has]...kept connecting that medium with a history,” he says,

“and that’s a very tough thing to do.”

Comprising 47 paintings, drawings, sketchbooks and monotypes made between 1997 and last year, *Death and the Maid* will explore themes long present in Brown’s work, such as the memento mori, the vanitas and the specter of beautiful women flirting with death. Many of the works have never been shown before. The exhibition is inspired by imagery in her triptych *Fair of Face, Full of Woe*, which entered the Met’s collection soon after she painted it in 2008. It’s based on the 1892 drawing *All Is Vanity* by the popular illustrator Charles Allan Gilbert, which features a 19th-century glamour girl admiring herself at a mirrored dressing table—a bit of visual trickery that, if one squints, becomes a skull.

The show will also include two new paintings, *Maid in a Landscape* (2021) and *Death and the Maid* (2022), which both suggest a woman dancing with a skeleton within a thicket of snaking brushstrokes—scenes inspired by *Death and the Woman*, an Edvard Munch etching in the Met’s collection. There will be still lifes as well, like *Nature Morte* (2020), a depiction of two lemons and a lobster that’s a take on 19th-century Dutch golden age painting. The implication in all the works, says the exhibition’s curator, Ian Alteveer, is that “death is ever present. No matter how young, how beautiful, how hard you fight against it, it will always be there waiting.”

In the show’s catalog, Alteveer suggests that the paintings of overstuffed domestic interiors,

BRUSH HOUR

Clockwise from near right: A work in progress; figures made from Sculpey clay; pastels; a paint-spattered chair in front of a work in progress, left, and *Lambs with lemons*, 2022. “Cecily takes this all very seriously and has very high standards,” says fellow artist David Salle, “aesthetically, intellectually and in terms of emotional honesty.”

like *Hangover Square* (2005), recall Brown’s London student days, when she made money as a house cleaner (hence the word *maid* in so many titles), as well as her early days in New York, a period when she had a heavy-drinking, hard-partying reputation that seemed to borrow from the abstract expressionists whose brushwork she emulated. A more recent variant is *Selfie* (2020), of a room teeming with furniture and objects, including a couple tangled on a bed. It was made early in the pandemic, when Brown decamped with her husband, the architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, and their daughter, now 13, to their second home in Nyack, New York, and it summons up an enclosure filled with windows, mirrors, paintings and doors—multiple perspectives packed into a single space.

Brown’s life was unexpectedly upturned when she met Ouroussoff in 2007. “When I got this place,” she says, referring to her studio, “I thought I’d be single forever and certainly no children. And I kind of ruled out all that, so this was meant to be a live-work space. But then I met Nicolai...and marriage and child happened fairly quickly.” The couple married in 2008, and their daughter arrived the following year. Throughout the studio are traces of her presence, like a group of Sculpey polymer clay figures, something mother and daughter started working on for fun years ago and that Brown recently began playing around with again. She likens her attitude toward sculpting to that of a musician trying out a different instrument. In the same day, she says, she might work on a big painting, a little painting, a watercolor, a print and a drawing. As for sculpture, she says, “It’s probably helpful to use a different part of your brain.”

Brown first made her name in 1997 with paintings of copulating bunnies she showed at Deitch Projects, and she became even more famous for super-size, expressionistic canvases filled with people doing the same thing. By 2000, after she’d moved to Gagosian, which boosted her prices to six figures, she had appeared in *New York* and *Vanity Fair*, posing for glamour shots and named alongside other hot young things who were reinventing painting, like John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage and Damian Loeb.

Her fellow painters, however, have always known her to be deeply serious. Amy Sillman, who became friends with Brown later, remembers being struck by one of Brown’s early Gagosian shows. “I thought to myself, Wow,

this is incredible,” she says. “This woman paints flesh. She paints the drama of what it means to have a body and to have desire and to have that body be a surface.” David Salle first met Brown in the late ’90s, at a cocktail party hosted by artist Alex Katz, who had just painted her portrait, and the two later taught Yale art students together. “Cecily takes this all very seriously and has very high standards,” he says, “aesthetically, intellectually and in terms of emotional honesty.”

In 2014 Brown quietly slipped away from Gagosian and began working with former Gagosian director Andrea Crane, who serves as a kind of agent and collaborator. “When I was younger, I thought the whole point of the gallery was that they took care of everything so you could paint,” Brown says. But as she and her career matured, she began to realize “maybe it would be better to be more involved and not to have handed over the power quite so much.” From the start, she says, “the idea was always... to be more independent and to be able to do projects freely with others.” Crane says she sees herself as an extension of Brown’s studio, acting as a bridge with museums, Brown’s galleries and other opportunities. Brown now shows with London’s Thomas Dane and New York’s Paula Cooper, among others, and she and Crane continue to meet weekly.

Crane suggested new ideas, like going public with Brown’s massive cache of drawings, which resulted in a well-received 2016 exhibition, *Rehearsal*, at New York’s Drawing Center. Chief curator Claire Gilman recalls being floored when she entered Brown’s studio and saw hundreds of drawings, pieces that reworked other sources, both high and low, from Francisco Goya etchings to the cover of Jimi Hendrix’s 1968 album, *Electric Ladyland*. Initially conceived for a smaller gallery space, the show morphed into a full-scale exhibition when Brown, excited by her first discussion with Gilman, suddenly began making enormous figurative works on paper.

Brown’s paintings also grew more massive when she had her first show at Paula Cooper Gallery in 2017. She created five monumental canvases of shipwrecks inspired by the work of the 19th-century French romanticists Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix. The exhibition included a 33-foot-wide triptych, *A Day! Help! Help! Another Day!*, based on Géricault’s 1819 *The Raft of the Medusa*, a depiction of an 1816 shipwreck in which the captain abandoned



scores of passengers to die. Brown’s swirling brushstrokes suggest a mass of limbs engulfed by waves—and also, by extension, the refugees who’d begun arriving in Europe via the Mediterranean.

“The more she’s worked, the more she’s gained confidence,” says Cooper. “A lot of people become afraid that they’re not going to be as good as their last work. She doesn’t have that at all.”

Critics were impressed, as were other painters. There had always been an ambition in the way Brown approached painting, says long-time acquaintance Julie Mehretu, but these monumental works felt like a big shift. “To be able to play in that, invent in that and innovate in that, that’s a complicated space,” Mehretu says. “Those paintings were pretty impressive.” Charline von Heyl, who’d shared studio visits with Brown when they both worked in the Meatpacking District, also noticed a change. “At the beginning, it sometimes seemed almost as if she wanted to mimic mastership,” she says. “Now she is a master in what she’s doing.”

Brown pushed herself further by taking on her first site-specific projects, starting with New York’s Metropolitan Opera House in 2018, for which she created two 26-foot-wide oil paintings of New York society that recalled a Max Beckmann Weimar-era party scene. More recently, she made a nearly 18-foot-wide frieze





FINE PALETTE

A table in front of a work in progress. "My work has always had a kind of unstable nature in that nothing's fixed," Brown says. "You think you know what you're looking at. You look again and it shifts."



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for London’s Courtauld Gallery. It features two strapping male nudes, gazed upon by a smiling female face, surrounded by allusions to other works in the Courtauld’s collection, including a sketch for Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, which shows a naked woman picnicking with two clothed men. “Cecily was very clear that she wanted to turn the tables on that,” says the Courtauld’s deputy head and curator of 20th-century art, Barnaby Wright.

But her most ambitious site-specific project was a commission from the Blenheim Art Foundation, which runs contemporary art exhibitions at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, the seat of the Dukes of Marlborough and Winston Churchill’s birthplace. Conceptual artists like Jenny Holzer and Maurizio Cattelan have shown work there for almost a decade, but Brown was the first British artist and the first painter invited to create an installation for this ultimate country house, filled with portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Sir Anthony van Dyck and tapestries commemorating a great 18th-century British victory over France.

After so much time away, Brown was eager to investigate what England meant to her, personally and artistically. She created bloody hunt scenes of terrified animals cornered by hounds, heraldic emblems that appeared to be melting, even pictures of fairies doing battle, installing them in and around the rooms and artwork to create a sort of establishment critique, which became more pointed by the time the show, delayed by the pandemic, went up in September 2020. By then Britain had also officially withdrawn from the European Union and was becoming, Brown says, “the worst version of itself.”

One eerily prescient installation in the Blenheim show was *The Triumph of Death*, a 17-and-a-half-foot-square artwork that she had painted the year before the pandemic. Inspired by a medieval Sicilian fresco memorializing an earlier plague, it depicts a skeleton on horseback laying waste to a crowd. The *Telegraph* dubbed the work the “Covid-19 *Guernica*,” and the nickname stuck. Less than two months later, Britain headed into its second lockdown.

Brown never got to see the installation, but she relished the experience, which pushed her, she says, to make paintings she wouldn’t have otherwise made and to rethink her origins.

“The whole idea of empire, when you’re a little kid, you don’t really get that that actually means colonialism,” she says. “You grow up singing ‘Rule, Britannia!’ and you learn about the war.... You only learn the good things about Winston Churchill, and you know, when you really look into it, everything’s obviously so much more complicated.” And now with the advent of “Harrygate,” as she puts it, “you’re sort of being forced, because of what’s happening with Brexit and the royal family, to look at Britain with fresh eyes. It’s a bit like what’s happened in America the last few years.” (Brown is now a dual citizen, having obtained U.S. citizenship during the Trump presidency to ensure she had the same nationality as her daughter.)

When the Blenheim installation went up, New York City had just emerged from its first pandemic wave, and Alteveer began visiting Brown’s studio to finalize the Met show concept. They considered relating her work to the collection, for example, pairing a monumental shipwreck with a Delacroix.

“It’s sort of mind-blowing when you first approach the work,” Alteveer says, “how many options there are and how many different subjects Cecily has tackled over the years.” Then he decided the key lay in the skull of *Fair of Face, Full of Woe*. “Death was all around us. It was a moment of deep fear and anxiety. I’m talking politically but also healthwise,” he says. “We were passing through a modern-day pandemic that reminded me of my teenage years during the HIV/AIDS crisis.” Brown, he realized, had been painting memento mori, that cornerstone of Western painting, for years.

When Alteveer approached her with the idea, Brown recalls, “I was so thrilled...because I felt like it was a part of my work that hadn’t really been talked about, looked at [or] shown.” She was already working on *Vanity Shipwreck* (2020–21), another painting of a woman at a dressing table, but at sea amid turbulent waves.

“My work has always had a kind of unstable nature in that nothing’s fixed,” she says. “You think you know what you’re looking at. You look again and it shifts.” Increasingly, she says, “I feel there’s this instability to now, especially in the last five years or so, whether it’s Britain, America or just the world in general. But it’s funny: For the first time my work feels topical.” ●