

Deborah Brown

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Recent Paintings

September 18 - October 17, 2014

Essay by Paul D'Agostino

Curated by Matthew Neil Gehring

Flecker Gallery

Suffolk County Community College

Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

On the cover:

Marquise (detail), 2014, oil on canvas, 70 X 80 inches

Director's Foreword:

This exhibition, *Deborah Brown: Recent Paintings*, has been formed out of an evolutionary process with over a year of planning and development. Initially conceived as an exhibition of her urban-psychological landscapes inspired by the gritty textures of Bushwick, Brooklyn, it shifted over time. Through studio visits and ongoing discussions, it has come to focus on her most recent and current works that offer a return to the figure in contemporary painting, by way of art history. Among the inspired allusions to masterpieces of painting and sculpture, there is a fresh and frenetic energy. We follow the artist's hand; the pace, breadth, and depth of her intuition and thoughtful considerations are all there in the character of the arc, color, and speed of each mark. Good strokes, indeed. Whether her subject is the detritus of contemporary humanity, or the treasured relics of its past, Brown's work is distinctive and embodies a spirit of power and longing with a brush that is clearly her own.

I have held that the true challenges of being an artist in both word and deed are nearly impossible to adequately describe to anyone not also driven in a similar way. Chief among these challenges, the challenge for the seasoned player, is to embark on and sustain this existential journey into the darkness of your own psyche, to continue to survive the hostile territories of internal and external doubt, to grapple with all of the art of the past, all the art of the present, and to arrive at a place that is undeniably your own while taking a position in relation to the zeitgeist, at once temporally relevant, but also timeless, limitless. Deborah Brown has successfully met this challenge and continues to take it on; for it is without end, except in our own finality. In a recent essay for the *Brooklyn Rail*, Carter Ratcliffe eloquently stated that the element which distinguishes art (or at least the art he finds worthy of consideration) from anything else in our human milieu is that it is created deliberately with the intention of being infinitely interpretable. Here also, Brown's paintings triumph.

Deborah Brown earned a BA from Yale and her MFA from Indiana University. Since 1982 she has lived and worked in New York where she is represented by Lesley Heller Workspace. She has had one-person shows at galleries and museums across the country. Her public art projects include mosaics commissioned by the MTA for the Houston Street subway station in Manhattan and roundels for the Port of Miami. In addition to her studio practice and very active exhibition schedule, she manages to own and direct one of the most influential galleries in Brooklyn: Storefront Ten Eyck, near the East Williamsburg and Bushwick border. Brown also serves on the board of NURTUREart, the artist advisory board of BRIC, and Community Board #4 in Bushwick, creating opportunities for the art community and the local communities that are our hosts and contexts.

Deborah Brown is accomplished, elegant, tenacious, and generous. She is a progenitor of this moment in the New York art world, one who is raising the bar as well as all of the boats around her. Flecker Gallery is most fortunate and delighted to host this exhibition.

Matthew Neil Gehring, Director

Deborah Brown: A Painterly Trajectory

by Paul D'Agostino

I happened to learn several years ago that a most important painting in Deborah Brown's mental canon is Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), a rapturous work in which nature's inherent, inescapable bluster, churn and passively idyllic solemnity are everywhere apparent, and everywhere abundant, and everywhere aflux betwixt stillness and stir, calm and gust.

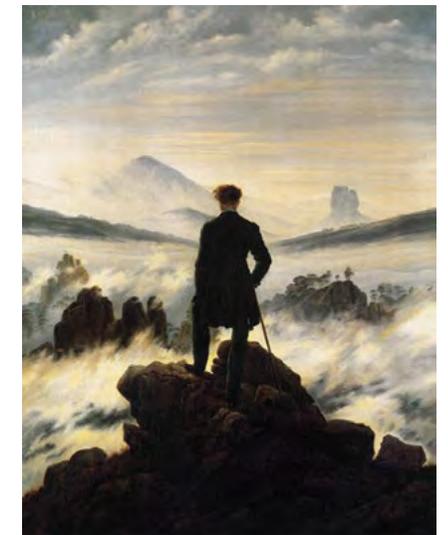
Before all this is poised one lone figure, his back turned to the viewer, his undepicted visage caught in imaginably wide-eyed beholding of the peaks, clouds and crags arrayed before him. The scene is nearly audible. We can almost smell the air he breathes, its blue and its brisk. We are with him, as viewers, and we become him; we share his mid-hike pause and walking-stick-enhanced stance of possible fatigue, of most probable pride. It is a landscape painting about landscape painting. About looking, observing, ingesting, encompassing. It is a visual seizing, on various levels, of not only the very genre it both depicts and defines, but also of a whole range of mores and modes corresponding to Friedrich's indubitably Romantic worldview.

All of that nature. All of that freedom. All those airs of solitude, mystery, history.

All whipped into a whirling, whistling sublime.

I knew Brown's work quite well before I found out how important this painting has long been for her. Ever since then, though, this incidental bit of insight into her creative mind has led me to view her oeuvre overall—from her charmingly placid landscapes of years past to her most recent art-historical explorations—as charged with a pliantly pictorial Romantic thrust. I have also long admired her treatment of skies.

If not somewhat Romantic in terms of narrative logic and temporal breadth, at least poetic is the trajectory that led Brown from her earlier extra-urban observations of natural flora and fauna to her most recent homage-like renderings of canonical works from various eras. Sometime around when Brown moved her studio practice from Manhattan to Bushwick, Brooklyn, is when her often peaceful and bucolic, at times rather blissful landscape works depicting seas, shores, woods, waters, fields and the occasional heron gave way to meditations on her new creative sphere. Hence, then, the barbed-wire fences and variably dilapidated structures; hence the fledgling flora sprouting curiously, perhaps courageously through fractured sidewalks and cinder-block walls; hence



Casper David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, oil on canvas, 37.3 x 29.4 inches, Kunsthalle Hamburg



Deborah Brown, *Slag*, 2013, oil on canvas, 70 X 80 inches

the ubiquitous graffiti, the shoes adangle from telephone wires; hence the unshakable sense of the indirect aesthetic of all this, of its physio-emotional if not visual quietude. From her earlier landscapes to these post-industrial pastiches, of course, there are certain common features that Brown continued to treat with palpable awe and superb consistency: her radiantly chromatic, variably humored skies, those atmospheric canvases for cloud-play and expressive filterings of light. Indeed, Brown's arguable subject in her urban landscapes is most essentially, at least in this viewer's eyes, the sky. Herein, then, the plausibly Romantic statement of these works that might not readily scream with Romanticism: These matters of industrial detritus, these ruins and relics of our needs, wants, times and climes might not necessarily convey traditional beauties, yet the skies that beam, hum and burst above them are nonetheless no less—and perhaps all the more—sublime.

Yet another rather recent studio move, this time within the same general area and into a bigger space nestled more deeply into a mix of actively industrial and post-industrial structures, would trigger another shift in Brown's work. Her pictorial tendencies somewhat jostled, her creative freedoms opened up a bit more broadly, Brown began to allow greater abstraction to assume more formal primacy. Elements of industry and urban decay began to morph into great mounds of themselves, grand piles of flippantly discarded things that seem to have been jettisoned aside by path-clearing giants. Clearly having fun mounting and amassing these somewhat looser, at times nearly humorous forms, Brown let her skies darken or soften a bit, opting instead to imbue her newly patented, ostensibly freeform terrestrial subjects with her trademark bright colors and spark. These forms would not stay grounded for long, though, nor would they remain quite so freely formed. From one work of this type to another, Brown found herself crafting greater definition out of her mounds and piles. Her new forms became head-like, then proper heads, then she gathered them into a wonderful body of work called *Têtes*, some of which feature obliquely recognizable bust portraits culled from art history. In a particular one of these works, though, Brown expanded her dimensions and imaginative parameters to execute a full-figured re-rendering of a definitively monumental depiction, Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801-05). In her fervid painterly brushiness and brilliantly tight palette of blazing blues, Brown quickens and quakes the original work's formidable energies and agency. It had never gone quiet, to be sure, that steed. Yet in Brown's reworking, it neighs anew.

Paintings of this sort have formalized into Brown's current creative purview. Her compositional canon of reference-cum-reverence, though, has opened up to include historical sculptures as well, where Brown embraces and takes visible delight in the challenge of rendering three dimensions with two. This, of course, is what one does in landscapes. It lies also at the heart of portraiture and various forms of literal representation. Brown's somewhat different task, though, is that of removing an artwork's extant third dimension to paint

sculptural portraits, or portraits of sculptures. Take, for instance, her ebullient yet not exacting rendition of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-52), in which Brown seizes the swooning, seized subject's visage of pain and oblivion to bring it into graceful, agonizing focus; or her depiction of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's joyful *Bacchante aux roses* (1872), in which Brown's light touch and brushy treatment seem to tickle laughter out of the original work's animatedly inanimate subject while heightening her own work's depictive allure.

Where Brown limits her palette to some extent in her portraits of sculptures, as it were, she lets it explode with great robustness, if not nearly abandon, in her newest paintings of portraits. Her *Sun King*, for example, a reiteration of Hyacinthe Rigaud's *Louis XIV* (1701), seems to burst with even greater pomp and circumstance. Brown's brushy, gestural treatment imbues the monarch's capacious drapery, mound of hair and peacocked posturing with additional notes of physical absurdity while granting the composition, in a way, an acoustic element, nudging the royal subject into an almost cheerful chromatic dance. Though her mode of pose is ostensibly more reposeful, Brown's lounging subject in *Marquise*, a take on François Boucher's *Madame de Pompadour* (1756), is no less kinetically infused than her more regal consort. In both of these works, Brown's colors flit about and crackle with notes of exuberance that recall her earlier heaps of detritus, and of course her even earlier skies. Here, then, and in other works in this series—imagined portraits of literary protagonists, reimagined depictions of horse-backed sitters, grandiosely collared aristocrats, busts of lords—it seems Brown has just begun to tap into an almost fathomless trove of subjects-cum-muses for her Romantic impulses.

Infused with formal freeness, informed by freedom of imagination, embellished with brushy movement and broadly delightful palettes, Brown's explorations into the pictorial and sculptural canon of art history are also, like Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, self-aware. They are artworks about artworks, about painting's potencies and potential, about its material reach. They are, like Friedrich's hiker posing momentarily in a mountainous midst, both historically stilled and pictorially astir.

Much like Friedrich's work, moreover, Brown's new paintings are about looking, observing, ingesting, encompassing. In the vast landscape of artworks that reside in her mind, Brown is perhaps that wanderer. The pictorial peak she has reached, where she pauses with an awed beholder's inspired eyes, whistles and whirls with pensive echoes and reflective pride.

Paul D'Agostino, Ph.D. is a New York based artist, writer, translator and professor, and Art Editor at *The L Magazine*.



Deborah Brown, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 2014, oil on canvas, 70 X 80 inches

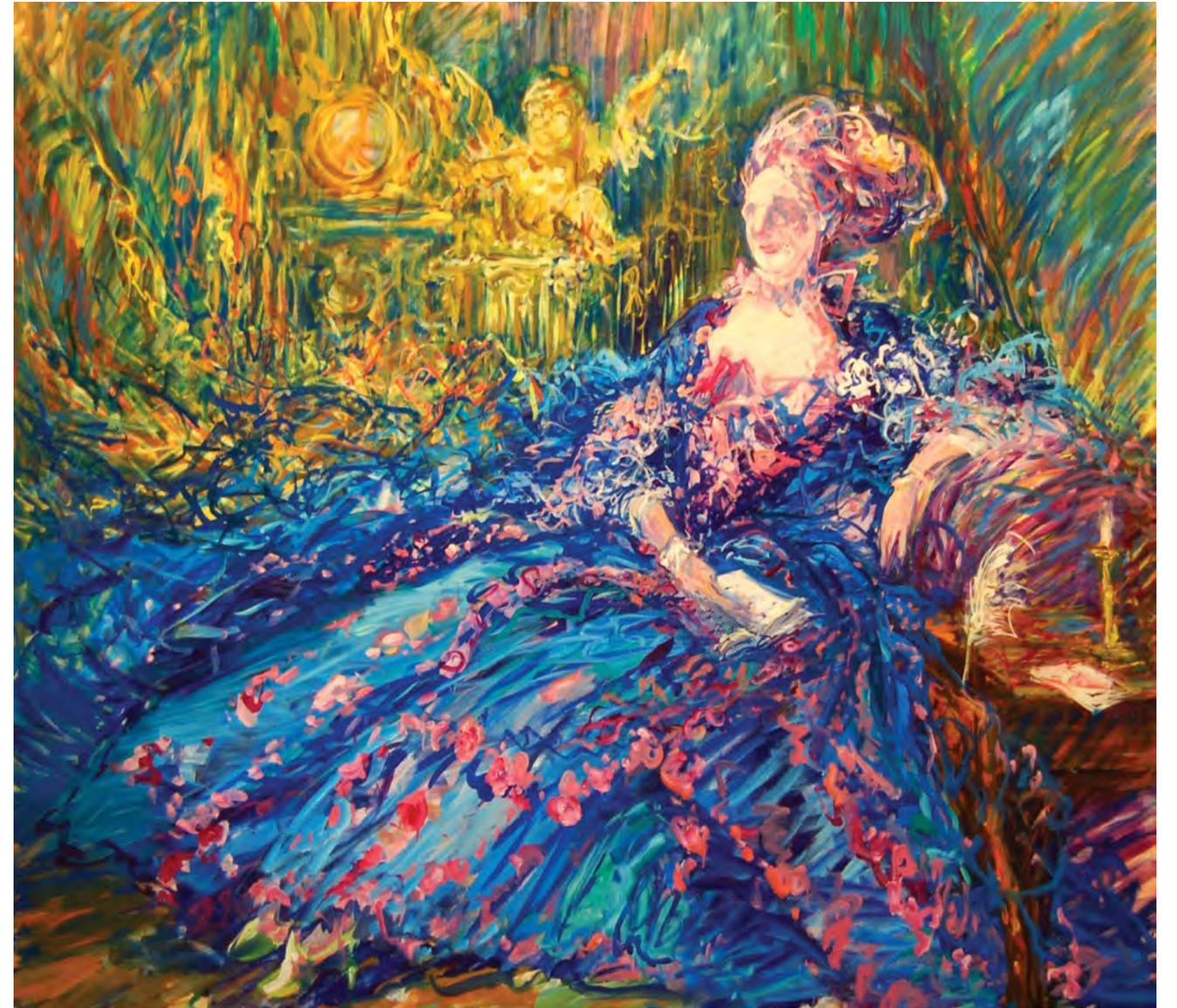
"I came to a crossroads where the work could go in a totally abstract direction or toward a new kind of figuration in which the accretion of marks became something more recognizable. I took the second course."

-Deborah Brown

Black Hat, 2014, oil on canvas, 36 X 36 inches



Marquise, 2014, oil on canvas, 70 X 80 inches



Sun King, 2014, oil on canvas, 70 X 80 inches





Tête (equestrian), 2014, oil on canvas, 30 X 30 inches



Kutuzov, 2014, oil on canvas, 24 X 20 inches

"My hand and eye respond to the physical process of mark-making and color application. Things happen when I am working that I could not predict. I nudge the elements in a certain direction and then let incident and accident occur. Being surprised is an essential part of the process."

- Deborah Brown

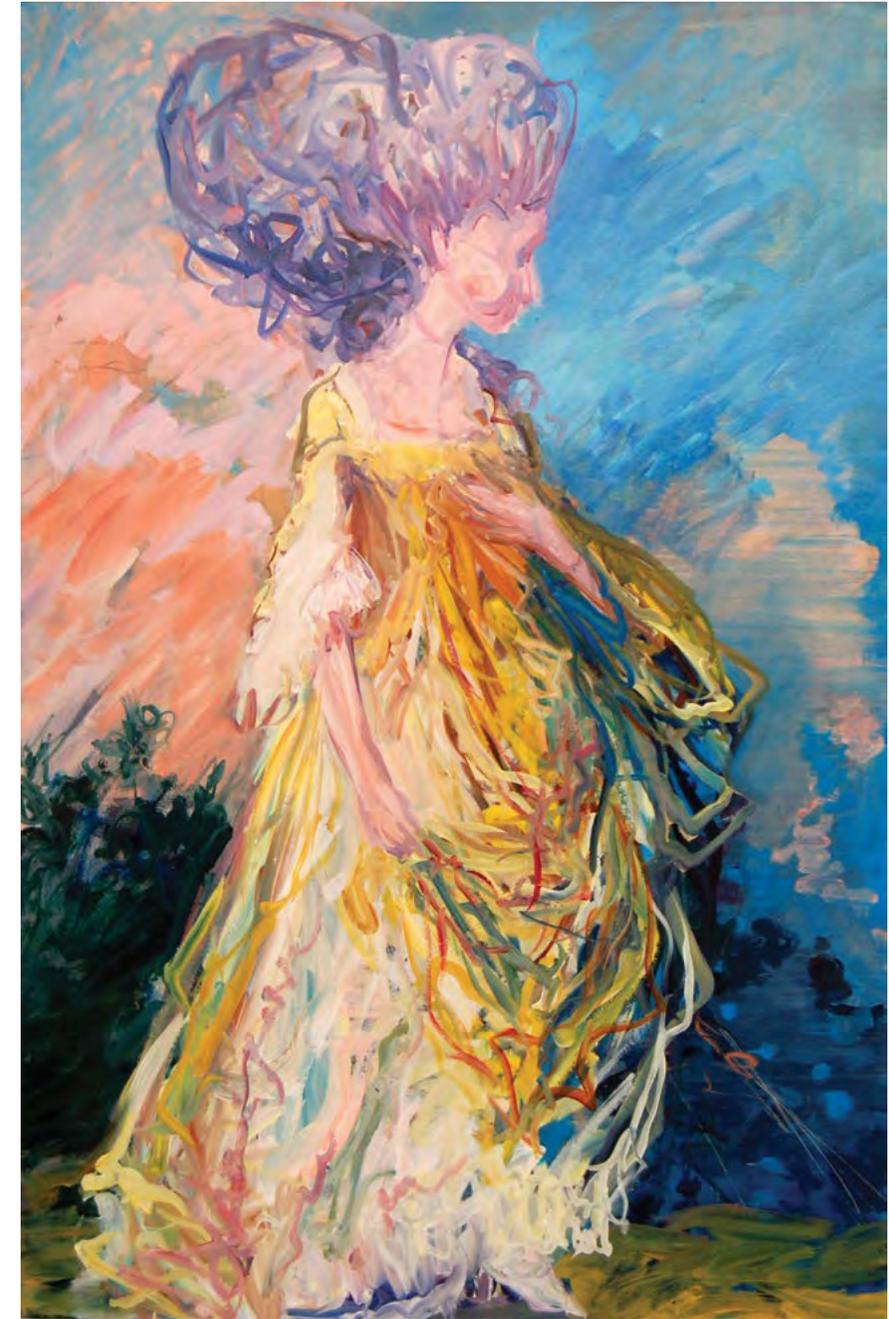
Infanta Maria Teresa, 2014, oil on canvas, 48 X 48 inches



Pony, 2014, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches



Pastorale, 2014, oil on canvas, 60 X 40 inches





The Good Shepherd, 2014, oil on canvas, 60 X 40 inches



Mermaid, 2014, oil on canvas, 60 X 48 inches

Bacchante, 2014, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches



"To me, there is no bigger challenge as an artist than engaging the human figure. You are working in the greatest tradition in art history, playing for all the marbles."

-Deborah Brown

Thalia, 2014, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches



Deborah Brown

www.DeborahBrownFineArt.com
www.LesleyHeller.com

EDUCATION

1978 M.F.A., Indiana University, Bloomington
1976 B.A., Yale University, summa cum laude,
Phi Beta Kappa

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014 Lesley Heller Workspace, New York
2012 The Active Space, Bushwick, NY
2011 Lesley Heller Workspace, New York
2010 STOREFRONT, Bushwick, Brooklyn
2008 Lesley Heller, New York
2008 Hebrew Home at Riverdale, New York
2006 Lesley Heller, New York
2005 Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art,
Sarasota, FL
2003 Laurel Tracey Gallery, Red Bank, NJ
2003, 01 Cheryl Pelavin Fine Arts, New York
2000 Kingsborough Community College,
Brooklyn, New York
1998 Sarah Morthland Gallery, New York
1996 Addison/Ripley Gallery, Washington, D.C.
1996 National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.
1994 Modernism, San Francisco
1994 LedisFlam Gallery, New York
1992, 1990, 1988, 1986
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York
1991 Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina
1989 Robischon Gallery, Denver
1989 Gloria Luria Gallery, Miami
1988 Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, California
1987, 85 Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014 "Color Me Badd" curated by Chris Bors, NARS
Foundation, Brooklyn, NY
2013 "Thanks," curated by Adam P. Smith, Lu Magnus, NYC
2013 "Pyramids Along the Nile," English Kills, Brooklyn
2013 "Second Nature," two-person show, Allyn Gallup
Contemporary Art, Sarasota, FL
2012 "Land Escape," Parallel Art Space, Ridgewood, NY



At ease: the artist in her Bushwick studio. Photo: Youngna Park

2011 "Memory is a Metaphor," Kenise Barnes Fine Art
Larchmont, NY
2010 "Landscapes," United States Embassy, Tunis, Tunisia
2010 "Spazi Segreti" Centotto, Brooklyn, NY
2010 "Ocketopia," curated by Austin Thomas
Lesley Heller Workspace, New York
2009 "Brooklyn Art:Work," Artist Honoree, Gala, BRIC
Rotunda Gallery & Steiner Studios, Brooklyn, NY
2009 "Bushwick Biennial," NURTUREart, Brooklyn, NY
2009 Pocket Utopia, Brooklyn, NY
2008 "Mythic Landscapes of America," Heckscher Museum
Huntington, New York
2006 "Going Ape: Confronting Animals in Contemporary Art"
DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA
2005 "City Art: New York's Percent for Art Program,
Center for Architecture, New York
2005 "Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit, Celebrating 20
Years of Public Art, UBS Art Gallery, New York
2005 "Sky, Land, Water," Art Mus. of So. Texas, Corpus Christi
2004 "Fake Plastic Trees," Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York
2003 "Unlikely Portraits," Miller Block Gallery, Boston
2002 "In the Garden," Winston Wachter Fine Art, Seattle
2002 "Inner Light," Weisman Museum of Art, Malibu
1999 "Water," Gibbes Museum, Charleston, South Carolina
1999 "Wildflowers," Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY

SELECTED AWARDS

2005 Nominated for Louis C. Tiffany Foundation Award

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2014 Ann Landi, Artists' First Influences, ARTnews,
May, pp. 82-89
2014 Benjamin Sutton, "Art: Major Players," Brooklyn Magazine
Spring Issue, pp.66-67
2014 Brooklyn Magazine, "The 100 Most Influential People in
Brooklyn Culture," March 11
2014 Sharon Butler, "Speaking Deborah Brown's Language,"
Two Coats of Paint, March 3
2013 Emily Colucci, "Deborah Brown is Showing on the LES
While Going Big in Bushwick," Bowery + Bedford, July 10
2013 Vera Haller, The Wall Street Journal, "Brooklyn Museum
Tests A Democratic Model," 6 February, p. A15
2012 Holland Cotter, Art Reviews,"Deborah Brown:
Freewheeling," The New York Times, June 15, 22, 29
2012 Holland Cotter, "The Latest Vibe Moved to Brooklyn"
The New York Times, June 8, page C35 + 38.
2011 Lucie Alig, "Not an Aesthetic, But an Attitude": Artist
Deborah Brown on the Future of Bushwick's Art Scene,"
Art Info , 27 Sept.
2011 Araceli Cruz, "True Grit: Deborah Brown, "The Bushwick
Paintings," The Village Voice, 5-11 January, p. 18
2010 James Panero, "Gallery Chronicle," The New Criterion,
"Deborah Brown: The Bushwick Paintings," May, p. 50.
2010 "The Bushwick Paintings," The L Magazine, 24 April, online
2009 Benjamin Evans, The 2009 Bushwick Biennial,
NurtureArt, p.34
2008 Benjamin Genocchio, "From East to West," NYT,
19 December.
2006 Rachel Lafo, Going Ape:Confronting Animals in
Contemporary Art, exhibition catalog, DeCordova
Museum, p. 10.
2005 Eleanor Heartney et al, City Art: New York City's Percent for
Art Program , Merrell Publishers Limited, London, p125.
2003 New American Paintings, Open Studios Press, Boston, #44.
2001 Reena Jana, "New York Reviews," ARTnews,
October, p. 174.
2001 Ken Johnson, "Art Guide," The New York Times,
1 June, p. E34.
2001 Bonnie Biles, "Gallery Watch," Art & Antiques,
May, pp. 36, 38.
1998 Ken Johnson, "Art Guide," The New York Times, 3
July, p. E34.

1995 Grace Glueck, "Prowling the City for Art?" The New York
Observer, vol. 9, no. 31, 14 August, p. 18.
1991 Gerrit Henry, "New York Reviews," Art in America,
April, p.168.
1989 Ruth Bass, "New York Reviews," ARTnews, Jan.,
pp. 141-44.
1988 Marlena Donohue, "The Galleries," The LA Times,
29 Jan. , p. 16

PUBLIC INSTALLATIONS

2011 Mosaic murals, Animal Shelter, Memphis, Tennessee,
commissioned by UrbanArt Commission
2002 Mosaic roundels, Royal Caribbean Cruise Terminal,
Port of Miami, commissioned by Miami-Dade Art in
Public Places
2001 Mosaic frieze, PS. 178, Manhattan, commissioned by
NYC Department of Cultural Affairs Percent for Art
2000 Mosaic mural, Garfield Avenue Station, Jersey City, NJ
Hudson Bergen Light Rail Transit, commissioned by NJ
Transit
1994 Mosaic murals, Houston Street Subway Station,
Manhattan, commissioned by New York MTA Arts for
Transit

SELECTED MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Indianapolis Museum of Art
DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, Massachusetts
Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Malibu
Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi
Bass Museum of Art, Miami
Orlando Museum of Art, Florida

SELECTED PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

JP Morgan Chase Art Collection, New York
Fullbright and Jaworski, New York
Federal Reserve Bank of Boston
Amerada Hess Corporation, New York
United States Dept. of State, U.S. Embassy, Bogota, Colombia
Tudor Investments, Greenwich, Connecticut
ExxonMobil, Houston, Texas
Fidelity Investments, Boston
Raymond Leary and Melva Bucksbaum, New York
Francis Greenburger, Time Equities, Inc.

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Recent Paintings

September 18 - October 17, 2014

Flecker Gallery

Suffolk County Community College, Ammerman Campus

533 College Road, Selden, NY 11784

www.sunysuffolk.edu

www.fleckergallery.org

Gallery Director and Curator: Matthew Neil Gehring

Essay by Paul D'Agostino

Images courtesy of the artist and Lesley Heller Workspace

Photography of artworks: Deborah Brown

Artist quotes are from a 2014 interview conducted by Alicia DeBrincat for *ArtFile Magazine*.

At right: The artist at work in her Bushwick studio. Photo: Youngna Park

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