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GALLERIES

Paintings Playfully Distilled from 18th-Century European Portraiture

by Peter Malone on April 26, 2016



Installation view, 'Deborah Brown: Parlor Games' at ART 3 (all images © Deborah Brown, courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace and ART 3 gallery) (click to enlarge)

Currently [on view in the project room at ART 3](#) in Bushwick are a half-dozen canvases by [Deborah Brown](#), consisting of figures, some based literally, others emblematically, on the portrait styles of various historical periods. According to the artist, her interest in people donning elaborate costumes, large hats, and often larger hairdos evolved from an earlier series of improvised paintings reflecting the visually jarring Bushwick streetscape. During the process of interpreting the tangles

of stinkweed, crumpled chain link fences, and haphazard façades reaching for sneaker-festooned power lines, Brown began to see Marie Antoinette's piled hair — and from that bewildering epiphany the aforementioned shift followed.

Brown's anecdote is more relevant to her work than one might think. Such inadvertent leaps of the imagination indicate a profound confidence in improvisation, though accompanied by a reluctance to explore the human subject matter that seems to me a significant part of her rediscovery. As the paintings indicate, what Brown takes from the 18th-century European portrait is mostly what remains of its stylistic structure, the bone and muscle of what was, in its time, a complete artistic expression built on a subject's identity and social or political underpinnings. Because Brown keeps to the limited idea of paintings about paintings, their portrait essence is reduced, though not entirely.



Deborah Brown, "Parlor Games 1" (2015), oil on masonite, 24 x 18 in (click to enlarge)

Brown is taking part in what has been interpreted as a resurgence of abstraction, but is in fact a pair of popular mainstreams travelling side by side. The pure abstractionists keep to the relatively safe waters of inventive ebullience, while Brown and company brave the rapids of recognizable subject matter, while holding fast to the same improvisational attitude that marks abstraction's timeless appeal. It seems obvious to me that the latter stream is the more difficult to navigate, especially for artists today who seem so reluctant to cross into the waters of

unguarded sentiment.

The exhibition at Art 3 is called *Parlor Games*, a title that implies Brown is determined to resist having the work drift much beyond good-humored play. Formal spontaneity rules in “Parlor Games 1” and “Parlor Games 2” (both 2015), which differ in method from earlier efforts in that they are not based on specific Old Master paintings but are stand-alone inventions in a mock grand portrait manner. With a touch that strikes a deft balance between the buttery assertions of Joshua Reynolds and the careless smearing of contemporary deskilling, flights of chaos here often spread unabated into painterly pileups. “Small Bonnet Powder Blue” (2015) is a good example.

However, in “Yellow Gloves” (2015), we see Brown maintaining the same casual paint handling, while creating enough of the subject’s identity to provide the viewer with a genuine semblance of human expression, one that’s neither misshapen nor purposely grotesque. Despite the effort to maintain a lighthearted if not strictly formal objectivity, the animated expression on the man’s face draws both recognition and interest. Getting such a demeanor from haphazard methods is quite an accomplishment.



Deborah Brown, “Yellow Gloves” (2015), oil on masonite, 24 x 18 in

It's as if Brown could not help herself. Apparently her painting abilities are such that she must maintain a conscious effort to avoid slipping deeper into actually portraying her subjects. Though held within the frame of parody, the faces in both "Yellow Gloves" (2015) and "Yellow Bonnet" (2015) offer the possibility of what a contemporary portrait could be, which is very much in opposition to the attitude apparent in the other paintings, with their blurred and demolished heads. It will be interesting to see where Brown takes her work next — or where her work takes her. On balance, the potential leaves one optimistic. An artist with this much skill and the confidence to forge ahead at full power when following sudden and strange flashes of inspiration may yet find a way out of the self-conscious doldrums that persist in our current painting climate.

[Deborah Brown: Parlor Games](#) continues at ART 3 (109 Ingraham Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through May 8.

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