

Large-Print Labels—English

**Cecily Brown: Themes and
Variations**

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Themes and Variations

Cecily Brown: Themes and Variations is a mid-career retrospective of the British-born, New York–based painter (born 1969). Among the current generation of artists, Cecily Brown is a revitalizing force for the medium. Brown’s dynamic blend of figuration and abstraction encourages a slow, immersive viewing experience. Time spent with her paintings is rewarded with scenes that gradually emerge from the abundant layers of paint.

Moreover, Brown references past work, both hers and others’, and in her reconfiguration of this source material, she visualizes alternative histories. Brown’s references range from centuries-old European paintings to contemporary pop songs; however, her sources’ messages of male domination over women and the political and natural worlds are subverted. This exhibition explores Brown’s unique perspective as a woman painter engaged with themes of eroticism and voyeuristic looking. Her work challenges art history’s patriarchal values and tells a radically different story, one in which women are fully realized as authors and subjects.

Returning and Revisiting

Brown's artistic practice is nonlinear. Just as she reexamines art history with contemporary issues in mind, she is known to repeatedly revisit her works. Sometimes she modifies her paintings over days or even years; other times she picks up subject matter from prior work as the basis for a new series. The works in this gallery explore how the artist has returned to past subjects and compositions, a practice that recurs throughout the exhibition.

Saboteur Four Times

2019

Oil on linen and oil on UV-curable pigment on linen

For this four-panel painting, Brown completed one canvas and then digitally reproduced it three times. She painted over each of the copied panels, which resulted in four different versions of one image.

Saboteur Four Times is a prime example of Brown's ability to reuse—literally recast—her own imagery.

Private collection, 50.2023.01

Selfie

2020

Oil on linen

In several works in this gallery, Brown paints domestic spaces that blend the bedroom setting from her earlier paintings with the picture galleries that she has painted in more recent years. From these dense compositions, bedroom furniture and nude figures become visible. The backgrounds are filled with square and rectangular shapes that can be read as mirrors, pictures, or windows. This inclusion of framing and looking devices gives the painting a self-referential quality.

Private Collection, 67.2023.01

Picture This

2020

Oil on linen

Green Family Art Foundation. Courtesy Adam Green Art
Advisory, 75.2023.01

Untitled

2023

Oil monotype print on Lanaquarelle paper with
hand additions in pastel

Private Collection, courtesy of Two Palms, New York, 23.2024.10

Untitled

2023

Oil monotype print on Lanaquarelle paper with
hand additions in pastel

Private Collection, courtesy of Two Palms, New York, 23.2024.11

In the Night Garden

In this section, Brown situates figures in landscape settings, inspired in part by 18th-century paintings such as those by Francisco de Goya. Her female figures sometimes appear coupled with a lover, and other times are objects of an uninvited sexual gaze. This demonstrates how Brown reconfigures art history to explore the sexual power imbalances implicit in Rococo-style painting from the era, in which voyeurism is a recurring theme.

The Forest Festival

2019

Oil on linen

Lillian and Luis Fernandez, 54.2023.01

Untitled

2005

Oil on linen

This scene is inspired by the story of Susanna and the Elders, a tale of sex and power depicted by Tintoretto and other artists. In this story from the book of Daniel, Susanna is bathing alone in her garden when she is suddenly accosted by two older men who have been spying on her. When Susanna denies their sexual advances, the men threaten to accuse her of sending her maids away so she could be with her lover. Susanna stands her ground and is brought to trial before being saved through divine intervention by the prophet Daniel. By returning to this story, Brown investigates how sex is intertwined with power imbalances between genders.

Ovitz Family Collection, Los Angeles, 56.2023.01

Girl on a Swing

2004

Oil on linen

This work's title refers to Francisco de Goya's *The Swing* (1779), a Rococo-style painting that reflects the 18th-century taste for leisure scenes, particularly those including a sense of voyeuristic looking. In Goya's painting, as in other paintings from the period, there is flirtation between the male and female figures. The strategic positioning of the nurse in the 1779 painting, where the underside of her skirt becomes visible with the movement of the swing, is repeated in the work by Brown.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Collectors Committee, 2015.62.1, 49.2023.01

All Nights Are Days

2019

Oil on linen

Green Family Art Foundation. Courtesy Adam Green Art
Advisory, 51.2023.01

Figures in a Landscape 2

2002

Oil on linen

The Broad Art Foundation, 63.2023.01

Spree

1999

Oil on linen

Collection of Mrs. Katheryn C. Patterson and Mr. Thomas Kempner

Sirens and Shipwrecks

In 2016 Brown became interested in shipwrecks, which inspired her to look at Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–1819). Géricault's work shows the aftermath of the wreck of the French ship *Medusa* off the coast of West Africa in 1816. Following the wreck, at least 147 people were set adrift on a shoddily constructed raft. The captain and his companions abandoned the raft and safely sailed onward in smaller boats. In their 13 days at sea, all but 15 people aboard the raft died. Géricault intended that his painting criticize the French monarchy and officers aboard for their negligence and indifference to the suffering of their subjects.

The social critique inherent in Géricault's painting lives on in Brown's presentation of shipwrecks. This source material generated a wide range of rich subject matter, allowing the artist to critique the power dynamics involved in current geopolitical issues, such as the ongoing migrant crisis in the Mediterranean.

Beach Blanket Babylon

2016–2017

Oil on linen

Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Collection,
60.2023.02

Madrepora (Nicosia)

2016

Oil on linen

Collection of Marguerite Steed Hoffman, 55.2023.01

We didn't mean to go to sea

2018

Oil on linen

The Rachofsky Collection, 57.2023.01

Black Shipwreck

2018

Oil on linen

Collection of Nancy and Pat Forster, 81.2023.01

Madrepora (Alluvial)

2017

Gouache, watercolor, and pastel on paper

Private Collection, Boulder, 26.2024.01

THREE WORKS IN THIS CASE:

The Sirens and Ulysses (after William Etty)

2018

Watercolor and ink on paper

The siren is one of the many gendered tropes that Brown explores in her work. Sirens, mythological creatures with voices that sound like women, were first introduced in the *Odyssey*, depicted in this scene. They subsequently appear throughout art and literature as seductress-like creatures who lure sailors to their death.

Private collection, 23.2024.03; Private collection, 23.2024.04;
Private collection, 23.2024.12

Untitled (Shipwreck)

2016

Gouache and watercolor on paper

Private collection, 23.2024.05

Untitled (Shipwreck)

2016

Pastel, gouache, and watercolor on paper

Private collection, 23.2024.06

Untitled (Shipwreck)

2016

Gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper

Private collection, 23.2024.07

TWO WORKS IN THIS CASE:

Untitled (Hylas and the Nymphs)
2018

Gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper

Private collection, 23.2024.08; Private collection,
23.2024.09

Painting Flesh

This section pairs some of Brown's earliest works with her most recent. These paintings take inspiration from two distinct art historical subjects: the female nude and the still life. For centuries, women have been depicted nude, often passively at rest, for the pleasure of the male viewer. Brown subverts this trope by painting women in the throes of self-pleasure and in erotic couplings—fully realized subjects of their own desire.

More recently, Brown began to look at 17th-century Dutch and Flemish still-life paintings depicting the spoils of the hunt. While the female nude and still-life subjects are seemingly unrelated, when seen together an analogy can be made between the way women's bodies are treated in traditional female nude portraiture and the depiction of hunted animal carcasses in still lifes. Both display an inherent violence toward their subject matter, whose bodies are offered up as trophies and objects of desire to be consumed by the viewer.

The Splendid Table

2019–2020

Oil on linen

Here, the bountiful fruits of the hunt are arranged seductively for the viewer in a still life inspired by the Flemish painter Frans Snyders. Deer and geese carcasses are hung throughout the composition. Bunnies, a recurring theme from Brown's earliest paintings in this show, now appear splayed on the central panel on the table's surface. This image of a bunny draped over a table recalls her paintings of nude women in bed. In this way, the work suggests an analogy between the bedroom and the banquet table.

The Labora/Hartland-Mackie Collection and The Rachofsky Collection, 78.2023.01

Untitled

1996

Oil on canvas

In the mid-1990s, Brown began painting bunnies. They are beautifully rendered—sometimes in naturalistic detail, other times in an abstract style. They run wild in her compositions, endlessly recurring in the manner that the species itself rapidly reproduces. “Bunnies” have been associated with female pin-ups from the beginning of the 1960s Playboy era, but they also call to mind the use of rabbits in 17th-century European paintings, particularly in still lifes of hunted game.

Promised Gift of Agnes Gund to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 59.2023.01

Lobsters, oysters, cherries and pearls

2020

Oil on linen

This painting exemplifies Brown's take on the still-life genre. While still lifes are free of human figures, the objects within them act as symbols for the viewer to reflect on their own humanity. A common subgenre of the still life is that of the memento mori—the moralistic reminder that life is temporary. This is illustrated through the inclusion of overripe fruits that will soon decay, or images of candles whose flames are destined to flicker out. In this painting, the objects are also suggestive of sexual body parts and acts. The oyster and pearl are a proxy for female anatomy, and in popular sayings the cherry is a stand-in for a woman's virginity.

Collection of Suzi and Andrew B. Cohen, 68.2023.01

Black Painting 4

2003

Oil on linen

Courtesy of Rubell Museum, Miami and Washington DC,
61.2023.01

Black Painting 2

2002

Oil on linen

In the early 2000s, Brown began a series known as the Black Paintings. They show a nude figure lying on a bed with white sheets against an intense and expressively painted black background. Inspired by paintings and erotica from earlier centuries, these works possess a nightmare-like quality that recalls the art of Romantic painter Henry Fuseli, as well as the white sheets in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*.

Brown's depictions of female pleasure challenge the traditional theme in Western painting of the passive female nude presented for the male gaze. Brown gives the female figure agency, so that she is not dependent on the male presence—as either viewer or participant.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Melva Bucksbaum, Raymond J. Learsey, and the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee 2003.304, 64.2023.01

Justify My Love

2002

Oil on linen

Brown often uses titles taken from pop music. “Justify My Love” is the title of a 1990 song by Madonna that was accompanied by an erotic music video. Madonna owned her sexuality in her self-presentation in a manner reminiscent of the female pleasure on display in the Black Paintings.

Forman Family Collection, 53.2023.01

These Foolish Things

2002

Oil on linen

Private Collection, 52.2023.01

On the Town

1998

Oil on linen

The Trustees of the Helios Trust, 69.2023.01

High Society

1998

Oil on linen

At the end of the 1990s, Brown began a series of complex large-scale compositions in which figures surface from thickly painted abstract backgrounds. They were inspired in part by the large, tumultuous groups of figures in Western art history drawn from mythological, biblical, and historical sources, as in Peter Paul Rubens's *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. *High Society* is one of the densest compositions from this time, with many layered scenes of sexuality and violence vying for the viewer's attention.

Martin & Toni Sosnoff, 82.2023.01

Untitled

2012

Oil on linen

Private Collection, 79.2023.01

Name That Tune

2012

Oil on linen

The source material for this work is a photograph by David Montgomery that became the cover of the European release of Jimi Hendrix's album *Electric Ladyland* (1968). For the photoshoot, 19 young women who were active in the London nightclub scene were hired to pose nude for the camera, reflecting the widespread objectification of women's bodies in the rock 'n' roll music scene. In this painting, Brown blurred her figures' faces, a play on the act of looking and being looked at in the original photograph.

Private collection, 65.2023.01

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