The Nation.

When the Painting Has Really Begun

On the mid-career work of Cecily Brown and Inka Essenhigh

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Cecily Brown *Selfie*, 2020. (Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

Critics are not required to be right, merely (as Donald Judd said of artworks) interesting. But part of what makes criticism of new art potentially interesting is that it is, in part, a gaze into the future. Remember Clement Greenberg in *The Nation* in 1946 predicting of Jackson Pollock's work, "In the course of time, this ugliness will become a new standard of beauty," and two years later, venturing that one of the same artist's paintings "will in the future blossom and swell into a superior magnificence; for the present it is almost too dazzling to be looked at indoors." Most criticism, of course, doesn't make its wagers on the future so explicitly, nor should it. Greenberg only unsheathed his crystal ball during those rare moments of highest intensity of feeling, and we should follow that example. Yet still our judgements remain hostages to fortune.

Musings on the fate of judgment have been much on my mind since seeing exhibitions by a couple of painters, Inka Essenhigh and Cecily Brown, who in the late 1990s seemed to me without doubt to be among the most promising painters on the New York scene. They recently exhibited their latest efforts in New York, at the Miles McEnery Gallery and the Paula Cooper Gallery, respectively. I had to wonder: Would I find they'd made good on their promises? Had they blossomed? Or might their great potential have been more in the eye of the beholder? Now these artists, both about 50 years old, are well into that strange and amorphous phase of life known as the midcareer, which can be (as Edward Said once bluntly observed in an article on middle-aged musicians) "not an especially rewarding period," when "one is no longer a promising young person and not yet a venerable old one."

Back in the 1990s, Essenhigh's signature material was glossy enamel paint, which immediately put her at a tangent to tradition. She played up the material's slick, cold, flat, industrial quality—a bit seductive, a bit repellent, and as far as can be from the atmosphere and organic nuance possible with oil paint. Her paintings felt more like models or diagrams of an alternate reality than pictures of it. Their imagery projected cadres of faceless and distorted cyborgian figures performing inexplicable rituals, at once militaristic, technological, and sexual; in a 1998 statement the artist herself evoked "contact sports, war, and cheerleading." The flatly rendered, evenly illuminated scenes were conceived, it seemed, as a sort of perverse decoration, kept by wit from going over the top; with their large areas of uninflected color and intricate linear draftsmanship, they seemed to fellow painter Ross Bleckner to "span a range from funky and cartoony to elegant, like science fiction rendered into Ming Dynasty decoration, Chinoise screens, or lacquered bowls." To me, at the time, it seemed that the unnatural twisting and torquing anatomies were being tormented in the name of a hypertrophied aestheticism.

Around 2002, Essenhigh switched to the more traditional medium of oils. It made a big difference: the elegant but airless planarity of her first paintings gave way to volumetric forms in depth. Essenhigh reflected that the change meant an intensification of emotion—for her, the enamel meant "cool irony." But her subject matter did not change as much as her style, at least at first. Fundamentally, what entered Essenhigh's work with the use of oil paint was shadows—and with them, spatial depth and forms with heft and volume to them. The world she was portraying became more concrete, more particular. For me that heightened concreteness created a problem, because the distinctly irreal—fantastically dreamlike—beings and situations she conjured could not support the tangibility with which she rendered them, or vice versa. Her imagery belonged more to the style she'd thrown over than the one she'd taken up in its stead, and it seemed as if it were calling for its former guise. Since, as it also seemed to me, her art was fundamentally driven by image-making rather than style, I found myself rooting for Essenhigh to return to her former way of working with enamel. Maybe I should have accepted this unease about the connection between style and imagery as essential to the paintings' meaning, as an embodiment of the shadowy disquiet that was always part of the work. But I couldn't. This formal displacement kept distracting me from the paintings' turbid psychological content, rather than heightening it.

Inka Essenhigh's *Full Bloom*, 2020. (Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

After a long wait, I got my wish: For the works in her previous New York show, in 2018, she'd started using enamel again. Most of the paintings in her recent show are enamel, as well. But I was wrong to imagine that Essenhigh's return to the medium she used 20 years ago would mean a return to anything like her style of that time. These days, Essenhigh is using her enamel paint with far greater subtlety and nuance than she did then; in fact, she's found ways to elicit unexpected depth and tone—to make it behave much more like oil paint than you'd think it ever could, only with a lightness that her oil paintings often lacked. In place of the "cool irony" of 20 years ago, the eccentricity of the new paintings feels emotionally exposed.

Some of the best things in Essenhigh's show are flower paintings, which is something that, strangely, I've noticed lots of painters—mostly women—doing lately: Hayley Barker, Jennifer Packer, and Nicola Tyson are among the first I think of. Maybe it has to do with a desire certain artists feel to find a more oblique way of approaching subject matter. Etel Adnan, a great writer who's also a remarkable painter—though I'm not aware that she's ever painted flowers—recently wrote: "Silence is a flower, it opens up, dilates, extends its texture, can grow, mutate, return on its steps. It can watch other flowers grow and become what they are." Paintings are silent in just that way. A bouquet can be a symbol of mourning, of consolation, or it can represent the fullness of life, its flourishing; it can bespeak a reverence for nature or a delight in artifice.

In some paintings a flower might remind you of your own backyard or window box; Essenhigh's might be growing on another planet. In her catalogue essay for the show, art historian Jenni Sorkin sees the subject of *Full Bloom* (2020) as "Baudelairean…flowers of evil that end in spikes and sharp edges and thorns." I think she's exaggerating—a bit. Coloristically, *Full Bloom* is the most subdued piece in the show, with deep green foliage fading back into a gray background, and mostly white flora rendered less blatant by a tinge of pale green; a few dark purple blossoms are most recessive of all. This puts the image at a distance; one hardly thinks of being able to touch anything in it, let alone of getting one's finger pricked. The flowers in this painting meet Adnan's description of silence, as not still but full of inner movement: dilating, mutating, extending in arabesque eddies to convey a distinctly unnatural elegance. But they also have something like the aloof distance of a figure in a portrait by Bronzino: Essenhigh's are mannerist flowers.

But if Essenhigh's flowers are somehow stand-ins for the human body, they still look like products of botanical growth. Consider the woman primping at her dresser in *Forever Young* (2020), with her leaf-patterned skin or garment—it's impossible to tell which it is: Her hand emerges from her wrist like a pistil from petals. The couple in the landscape of *Predawn in Early Spring* (2020) have sprouted from the earth like plants and are surrounded by others still germinating. Is it an understated satire of the desire to be one with nature and of the "plant-based" lifestyle that has become popular just as we're shifting nature itself to a state that is inhospitable to humans? One could guess as much, given another of the works here, *The Last Party* (2020), depicting an al fresco bash where one last drop is being poured from a bottle under a poisonous yellow sky.

There's something perverse and a little creepy about Essenhigh's anti-humanistic vision. What makes it hard to look away is the brilliance with which she uses the lushness of color to turn the sinister seductive. One critic even happily confessed that Essenhigh's skills practically undid him as a critic; in front of one of her paintings, Artforum's Alex Jovanovich wrote, "I haven't the faintest desire to engage in my critical faculties. I just want to be overcome by the supple, erotic strangeness of her surrealist narratives; the chitinous sheen of her works' surfaces; her Prada-meets–Star Trek palette; and the gelatinous, ectomorphic figures." Implying that human desires and actions are no more reasoned or humane than the development of a possibly poisonous plant, she proves her point by using chromatic sensuality—whether the palette is subdued, as in Full Bloom, or loud with contrast, as in Forever Young—to solicit our enjoyment of scenes that our brains say we should find disturbing, to make what's indigestible look delicious.

Cecily Brown has never changed her approach as fundamentally as Essenhigh did in switching from enamel to oil, and therefore she hasn't needed to create the kind of synthesis that Essenhigh engineered in changing back to enamel

without giving up all she'd experienced through the more flexible and organic medium of oil paint, to which Brown has remained ever faithful. As Jason Rosenfeld writes in a useful new book on Brown's work, part of the longstanding Contemporary Artists Series from Phaidon, "Brown's techniques and palette have shifted now and again throughout her career, but her pictures have retained a strong visual consistency over the past quarter century." Or as Roberta Smith more tartly put it in a review of Brown's recent exhibition, even while admitting her lack of real enthusiasm for the artist's work, "she has stuck to her stylistic guns and respect is due."

In a way, this very consistency should come as a surprise because, painting by painting, Brown's style looks impulsive, restless, mercurial; there's a go-for-broke, try-anything urgency about her way of using paint that you might imagine would entail more dramatic changes over time. In an interview in the same book, with curator Courtney J. Martin, Brown consistently emphasizes the idea of freedom as a goal, but also says that as a student, she recalls being tempted by video and installations, only to realize that, "as a painter it's much easier, because you know what you're dealing with every single time…. I missed the edges of painting." There are consistent, knowable parameters or boundaries, within which freedom can be exercised. One still senses Brown's respect for the way those edges help her organize her ideas.

Or is "freedom" too mild a word for what goes on inside the edges of Brown's canvases? It's anarchy she always seems to be courting. The paintings that first put Brown on the map in the late 1990s, as she herself later recalled, "were very bright and chaotic, very much like a Busby Berkeley song and dance routine, maybe with a hand grenade thrown into it." hey were typically named after old movie musicals. Back then, she said, "My paintings were very broken up and fractured but they had this sense of being too loud, with too much action—too theatrical—all things which I thought belonged in a painting." That shattered and recomposed imagery usually seem to be sexual in nature: Paintings such as *Can Can* (1998) seem to be artificial landscapes of detached body parts writhing with the desire to recombine and attain some kind of wholeness. It's as if Joan Mitchell were trying to redo Rubens under the influence of the Marquis de Sade.

There is maybe too much of a youthful urge to provoke in that early work, evident in the choice of titles taken from wholesome '50s musical fare like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* or *High Society* for paintings so unabashedly carnal in subject—no matter that what precisely might be going on in them is veiled rather than explicit, thanks to all the fragmentation and recombination of the fleshy imagery. Those titles were Brown's way of seeking refuge in a cool irony, similar to what Essenhigh sought through the use of enamel paint. But the sheer bravado with which Brown could pull off her strange synthesis of abstraction and figuration finally made any ironic pose untenable. Her gutsy way with the paint itself and her savvy at using color to hold together hyper-complicated compositions that always seemed to be on the edge of collapse—or, more often, of bursting out in all directions (that hand grenade she mentioned always wanting to toss in)—compels admiration, or at least amazement.

What's striking in Brown's work these days, as seen recently at the Paula Cooper Gallery, might at first be its continuity with her beginnings. Unlike Essenhigh, Brown has gone through no dramatic change, and therefore she has had no need to engineer a synthesis. Things shift around tensely, tumultuously, and unexpectedly within the canvas, but the flow from painting to painting shows no such unease. And yet there's also no sense of a merely dogged and

blinkered persistence, and certainly no diminishment of energy. Brown has said that her art swerves away from straightforward representation "because the minute there's a clear image, the mind just makes up its mind. The mind settles. And I don't want it to settle. I like the restlessness and the openness and the ambiguity that there are when there's a constant shift going on." Maybe the paradox is this: Only if Brown had ever let her art settle into a predictable formula would she have had to pull herself out of it by suddenly changing tack, but because she's been able to keep herself restless within the boundaries of her never purely abstract, never conventionally representational painterliness, she's kept her art refreshed.

One way that Brown has continued to challenge herself has been by taking on the risks of working at mural scale. She doesn't always pull it off. In 2019, at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, I was not quite convinced by her 33-foot-long triptych *Where, When, How Often and with Whom?* (2017). I didn't feel that she succeeded in finding a visual focus for the centrifugal forces she'd unleashed across this vast expanse populated by many figures. The more recent New York show included a triptych, nearly as big, that suggests that, for her, the excess of *Where, When* has led, as William Blake might have predicted, to greater wisdom. At about nine by 27 feet—the largest of several polyptychs on view—*The Splendid Table* (2019–20) is, as the title suggests, a still life unabashed in its evocation of the showpieces of the Dutch golden age. The painting's red-hot palette suggests that the whole overloaded surface might be about to go up in flame, perhaps as art history's burnt offering to itself. The eye is pulled here and there, in and out. The sometimes herky-jerky movements the eye is put through are exhilarating. If Essenhigh's affinities are with Mannerism, the swirling energy of Brown's canvases recalls the Baroque.

Still, my preference in Brown's oeuvre is not for such grand-scale extravaganzas. At a more everyday scale, in pictures whose basic parameters can be taken in all at once, one can more readily appreciate just how beautifully she has woven together the paintings' complex surfaces out of so many suave and fluid pathways of paint. It's rewarding to lose yourself in the incessant movement of colors only to realize you're not lost at all, but as it were subliminally led to comprehend the work's overall structure. Among the most intriguing smaller works here were some, such as *Selfie* (2020) that depict interiors whose walls are packed with perpendicular, rectilinear elements, quite different from the mashed-up shards of form out of which her imagery usually coagulates—apparently pictures densely pinned up. You see walls like that in corners of artists' studios, where they pin out postcards, snapshots, and reproductions torn from magazines or books—anything they think they might be able to use for visual inspiration. On the floor in the foreground, some not-quite-legible coupling seems to be going on. Or it could be an ancient Greek wrestling match—who knows? What counts, I think, is how those slippery-slidey fluid forms play off against the dominating rectangular ones and somehow subvert them. If this setting is the studio, then the semilegible figures at the bottom turn the painting into an allegory of artmaking as an erotic struggle.

Fellow painter David Salle once characterized Brown's work as concerned with "the erotics of art, both in terms of subject matter and also as a metaphor for the delineative nature of making an image." That means, first of all, that to make a painting, it has to be something you desire before you really know what it is—and then you have to struggle to make it respond to your desire but, equally, to struggle to shape your desire to respond to what the painting is turning out to be. It's a process that's elusive and sometimes disquieting, but Brown's work shows us that it can always be pleasurably so. Like Essenhigh, Brown has managed to let go of the cool irony that was an early defense for both of them—for all their bravura, a deeper vulnerability can be glimpsed in her recent paintings than before. And in that vulnerability is strength. Contrary to Said, these artists show that midcareers can have their rewards after all.