

Brown Sugar

by Dennis Kardon

Cecily Brown, Jan. 14-Feb. 19, 2000, at Gagosian, 136 Wooster Street, New York, N.Y. 10012.



[Cecily Brown installation view at Gagosian](#)

Cecily Brown is making a flat-out grab for the historical gearshift. She has taken the sexual power and energy that formerly was the exclusive domain of expressionist male painters and unashamedly claimed it for herself. For those familiar with her earlier paintings of copulating bunnies, and her subsequent demented orgy scenes that cross Francis Bacon with Fragonard under the sway of de Sade, Brown's new paintings are a leap.

In these huge de Kooning-like paintings, Brown has fractured or exploded or buried her formerly explicit erotic imagery in a churning sea of frenetic strokes and scrapes. This mass of fleshy colors still *feels* like it contains bodies. Squint long enough and maybe a leg appears, or is it an arm? A man's or a woman's? And is that a knee or the head of some giant cock?

Up close, the surface fragments into impossibly energetic, random gestures and marks. In her most explicit painting, titled *Lady Luck*, a woman's head in apparent ecstasy emerges upside down from the middle of a pink and red swirl. Maybe here is the key -- instead of depicting sexual situations, Brown now seeks to describe the *feeling* of sex in a way that is both aggressive, female and orgasmic.

Why female? In a physical, sexual sense, the imagery in these paintings is so dependent on an absence, on dissolving form, and their energy is so vibratory rather than phallic. And because they are so wet and translucent. The surfaces fairly glisten from oil and varnish.

Brown's new paintings are aggressively female because they challenge the viewer to fill them with form, while giving the most mixed of signals. So one has to decide whether to commit on the slenderest of promises while risking looking like a fool for falling for something so obviously and cheaply flirtatious.

Ambivalence here is understandable. Daughter of famous London art writer, David Sylvester, Brown is glamorously photogenic and writes and speaks articulately enough to contextualize herself (notably in *Flash Art* magazine two years ago, hand-in-glove with the male painters of the moment). With some fairly glib and provocative paintings, Brown snags two solo shows at Jeffrey Deitch, a hot venue for emerging artists, is suddenly sought by mega-collectors Charles Saatchi and Si Newhouse, and finally lands the first show of the new millennium at Gagosian. It is easy to want to see her fall on her pretty Brit butt!

But despite a withering review in the *New York Times* from Roberta Smith -- "naughty bits notwithstanding," she wrote on Jan. 21, "the majority of these paintings are uninteresting from any distance and ultimately vacuous" -- the fact is that Brown's new work just might be on the road to great. That I am not exactly sure intrigues me even more.

Why suddenly start to hide all the smut? Is she suddenly getting coy? One feels almost angry at not being able to decipher these paintings. The choice when looking is either to keep trying to put the various little strokes and squidges into some kind of coherence or dismiss them as the masturbatory paint flicks of an over-indulged de Kooning wannabee.

But the frustration belongs to the viewer rather than to the painter. At the most crucial point in her career, Brown has the courage (or the hubris) to make a seemingly unhip move. She practically invites her viewers to dismiss her, a challenge that has surprisingly powerful psychological force.



[Tender is the Night](#)
1999



[Spree](#)
1999



Lady Luck
1999

From a painter's point of view, it seems suddenly audacious for Brown to visually frustrate her newly found audience while unironically reviving a thoroughly dead painting style. For while there have been many attempts to bring back Abstract Expressionism, few have been successful at renegotiating an Analytic Cubist space.

Even more intriguing is the observation that her role models are exclusively men: Picasso, de Kooning, Bacon. She doesn't avail herself of the now-familiar feminist strategies of appropriation or critique.

Brown doesn't imitate men or take them on as much as she envelops them. Another sexual metaphor, perhaps -- but why not re-invent the traditionally male language of painting from a gynocentric point of view?

Can Brown maintain the incredible energy in these paintings? How long can the viewer remain interested in intimations of sex -- and will we remember her name in the morning? As always, the excitement exists in the anticipation.

DENNIS KARDON is a New York painter.



Dog Day Afternoon
1999



Puttin' on the Ritz
1999-2000



Puttin' on the Ritz
(detail)