

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Sheets, Hilarie M. 'Cecily Brown's Paintings Are at the (Other) Met'. *The New York Times* Online. 20 September 2018

The New York Times

Cecily Brown's Paintings Are at the (Other) Met



Cecily Brown with her painting "Triumph of the Vanities II," in the Dress Circle of the Metropolitan Opera House.
Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

When the Metropolitan Opera opens its season on Monday evening, well-heeled patrons ascending the building's sweeping dual staircase may recognize bits of themselves and their dramatic surroundings in Cecily Brown's huge paintings, stretching more than 9 by 25 feet, at the top of each landing.

Though the loose, gestural brushwork seems abstract, on closer inspection it coalesces into jostling figures, only to break apart again into fragments. Black bow ties pop out from the crowd, and then faces and dinner jackets start to come into focus. "There's an awful lot of groping going on," said Ms. Brown, the acclaimed British-born artist, lithe and animated in her New York studio. "As you come up, it's almost that you enter into the painting, and the crowd will be mirrored. People think my work is abstract, but I always see it as teeming with figures — here more than usual."

This is the first time since the Metropolitan Opera opened its doors in 1966, and Marc Chagall unveiled his two site-specific murals — "The Triumph of Music" and "The Sources of Music" — that an artist has been invited to make and exhibit work inside the main hall of the opera house. Ms. Brown, 49, is part of a small club of female artists with work commanding seven figures. This is her first public project in a space that isn't a museum.

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Awaiting their debut: Ms. Brown's paintings "Triumph of the Vanities I" (bottom) and "Triumph of the Vanities II" (upper). For the first time since 1966, when the Metropolitan Opera opened with Marc Chagall's murals, an artist will exhibit paintings inside its main hall. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

"She's created a bonfire of the vanities — that kind of excitement, passion and tragedy," said Dodie Kazanjian, founding director of Gallery Met, the nonprofit contemporary-art space at the Metropolitan Opera, who tapped Ms. Brown to make the paintings. "It's got all the emotions in it of what opera brings out."

The paintings, both titled "Triumph of the Vanities," will be on view through next summer.

Since Gallery Met, the white-box space for artist projects at the south end of the lobby, is being reconfigured by Ennead Architects as a new entrance for patrons and subscribers, to ease congestion at the lobby doorway, the Met's general manager, Peter Gelb, has let Ms. Kazanjian bring it directly into the opera house. She will choose an artist every year to take on the majestic front of the house — now open to the public for limited hours during weekdays and Sundays.

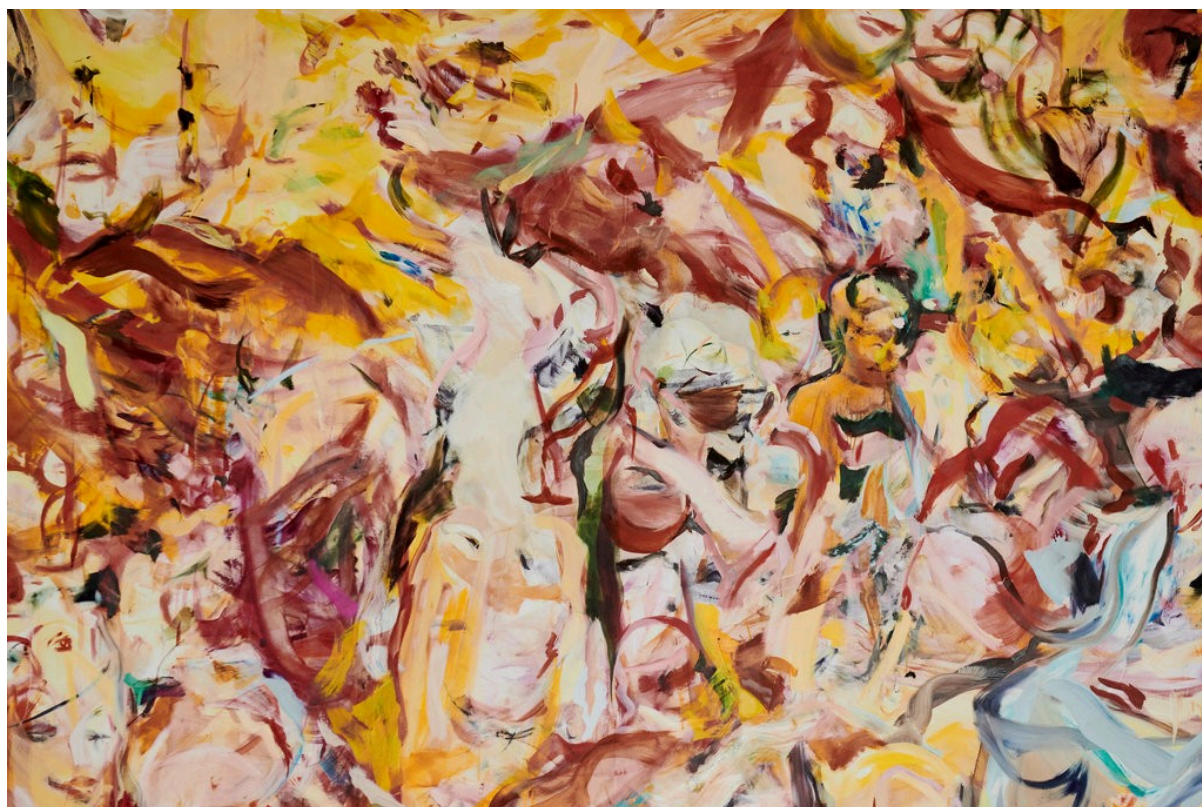
Confessing to being a "frustrated performer" who adores singing and bawdy musicals, Ms. Brown accepted the invitation immediately. "I love the schmaltzy drama of the building," she said of Wallace K. Harrison's design, picturing straight away a crowd scene set within a swirling space.

"There's a theatrical side to my work that sometimes I dampen down a bit," she added. "This felt like a chance for that to really come out."

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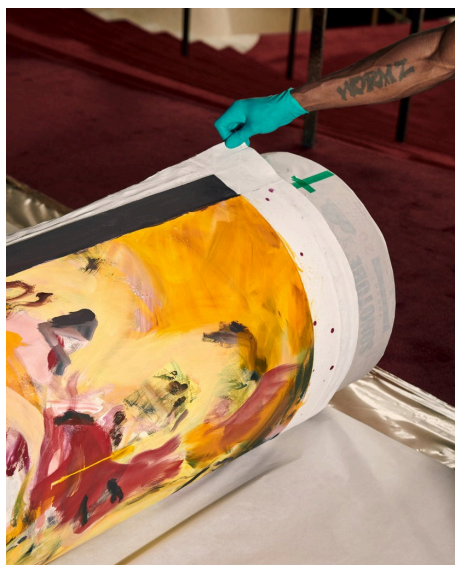
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Detail from "Triumph of the Vanities I" in the Grand Tier. Arms, legs, high heels, groping: all the drama and passion of opera captured in a painting. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The artist's paintings have always cannibalized fragments of figures and compositions drawn from her close study of artists throughout history, including Rubens, Delacroix and Degas. For the Met, she imagined a mash-up of a cocktail party scene, after Max Beckmann's "Paris Society," with Florine Stettheimer's paintings of soirees attended by New York's avant-garde during the 1920s through early '40s.



Unwrapping the giant painting "Triumph of the Vanities I" onto a support frame for hanging. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

A graduate of the Slade School of Art in London and a deft draftsman, Ms. Brown made drawings of fancy, dour-faced couples straight out of Beckmann, macabre scenes of hell copied from Hieronymus Bosch and images of performers lifted from William Hogarth's "Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn" and an old production photo of the "Ring" cycle (operas in this season's lineup).

The drawings, also on view at the Met, are part of Ms. Brown's process of internalizing her subjects before beginning to paint. "Cecily Brown: Rehearsal," a 2016 exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York, explored this idea.

"The title came from the original meaning of the word 'rehearsal,' which is about practice," said Claire Gilman, chief curator at the Drawing Center.

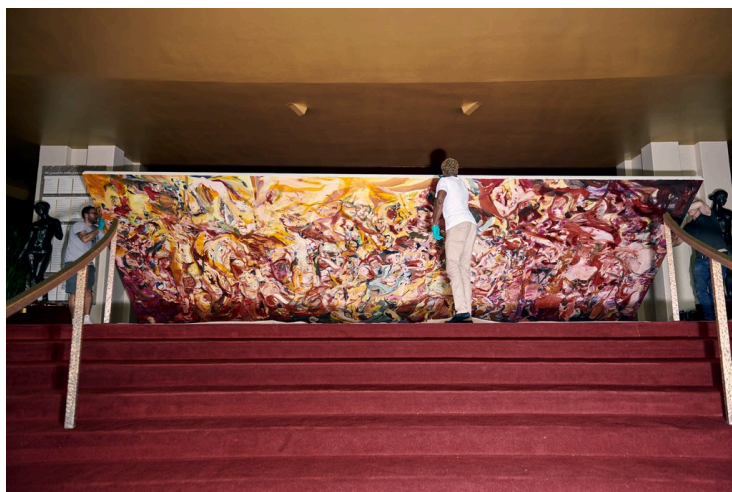
For Ms. Brown, the drawings are like notes. "When I come to paint, I don't need to look at the drawings," she said.

Using rollers, like a house painter, she laid down her first broad, looping strokes quickly across the two massive canvases, which she worked on in tandem. "It's the most fun I've ever had in starting," Ms. Brown said. "It was very freeing, like a dance." She began using these rollers when she

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The art handlers lower the painting "Triumph of the Vanities I" to stretch it even further onto the canvas. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

shifted to epic scale in paintings of shipwrecks, including one modeled on "The Raft of the Medusa," by Théodore Géricault, shown at the Paula Cooper gallery last year. It was acquired by Mitchell and Emily Rales for their museum, Glenstone.

The framework she laid down with rollers is the architecture for her densely layered brush strokes.

"There's a kind of sheen of cocktail dresses and fur and gowns, but then someone's got their hand on someone else's butt, or is grabbing their arm," she said. High heels are coming down steps. Long gloves may look like guns.

"I'm obsessed with double images that can be read two ways at once," Ms. Brown said.

"There are little secret plot points buried in

them, too," she added, pointing out cat ears and the oblique profile of President Trump.

Each painting is dominated by deep reds and golds, echoing the over-the-top interior design of the opera house and the palette of the nearby Chagalls — but "more gaudy and garish," Ms. Brown said.

The project was funded by the artist herself, who will have a survey of her work opening on Nov. 8 at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark.

At the Met, Ms. Brown also wanted to address the contentious history of the building of Lincoln Center. In the late 1950s, Robert Moses initiated the razing of many city blocks of tenement homes and businesses on the West Side to make way for a new world-class performing arts complex.

"All this grandeur was built on the backs of people who were uprooted by Lincoln Center," said Ms. Brown, whose figures in the lower sections of both paintings function almost as armatures, holding up the crowd.

"I wanted to make the painting that New York deserves right now," she said. "It's such a bloody awful time in so many ways. At the same time, New York is having one of its richest moments in history for lots of people. So I wanted a very celebratory picture, but also that tumultuousness and dysfunction."

"Painting," she added, "is very good at saying more than one thing at once."

During the opera season, certain areas of the Metropolitan Opera House are open to the public, free of charge, on weekday mornings from 10 am to 2 pm, and on Sundays from 12:00 pm to 4:00 pm.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/arts/design/cecily-brown-bonfire-of-the-vanities-metropolitan-opera.html>