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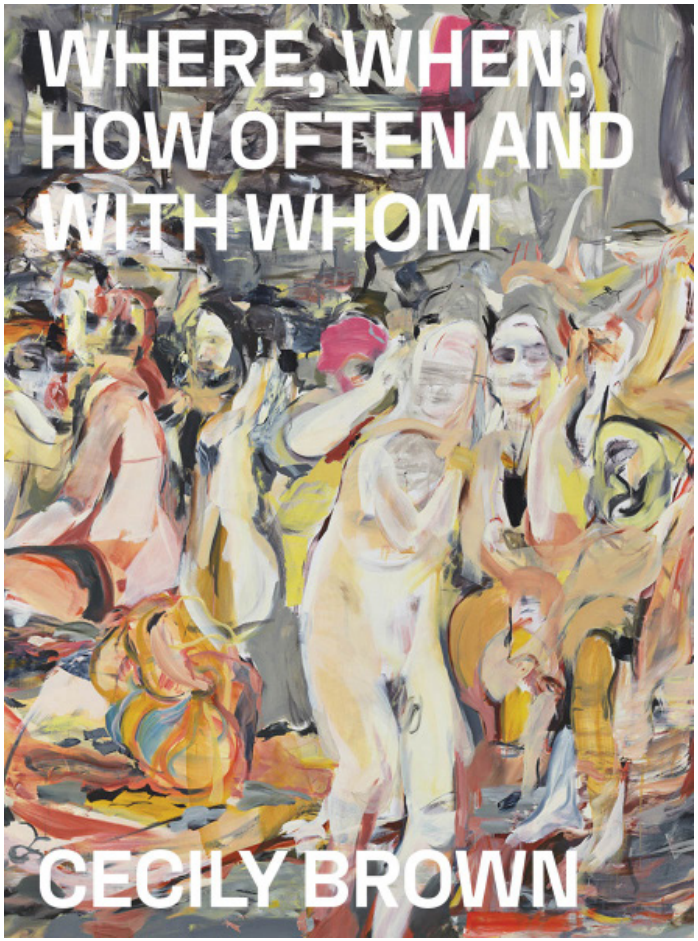
Painting as Marriage between Brain and Body



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PAINTING AS A MARRIAGE BETWEEN BRAIN AND BODY

An interview with Cecily Brown

Lærke Rydal Jørgensen and Anders Kold
/ Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Louisiana: ***Let us begin by talking about the painting that gives title to this book*** **– Where, When, How Often and with Whom.**
What are we looking at?
Cecily Brown: Shipwrecks. And women – or figures – on a beach. As with all my work, I begin with a specific motif in mind. But during the course of making the painting I can go very far away from that. And if I get lost then I'll go back to that in a very deliberate way. I'm always trying to chase the figure. There will be this struggle to restate the figure, when it tries to disappear entirely. At the same time, I often don't like the figure to be stated too clearly. So it is a battle back and forth. The fun and the excitement is that I don't know where it will end when I start. In this case, with *Where, When, How Often and with Whom*, I knew I wanted something to do with shipwrecks, which I've been painting a lot of over the last couple years. And I'd also been painting these women that started with a series of drawings and paintings from *Electric Ladyland*. And ever since those *Ladyland* paintings, this group of female figures have haunted the work, but they've almost changed their role. It's a bit like having your actors who in different paintings perform a different role. I steal figures from every moment of art history.

You include other sources in your paintings.
Yes. I draw a lot. Once you've drawn something – say, those boys from Degas' *Spartans* – four or five times they become part of your lexicon. It's as if you internalise the paintings or the images you copy and when you need a figure you can use it as your own. It's not exactly like sampling in music, but similar. Once you've got the cast of characters, they can perform different roles in different paintings. I'd been very struck by a series of photographs of a woman on the beach in Nice being surrounded by cops. It's such a distressing series of images, because you see her just taking a nap on a beach on a beautiful day surrounded by tourists or holidaymakers. Not only is it a very striking series of images, physically, but the story really resonated with me, and of course it is sickening that women are being told what they can and can't wear in the 21st century. The irony being that, there are stories from the 50s where women would get their bikinis measured on the beach to make sure they were covered up enough. And another irony, for me, being that with most of the people around her, who are wearing almost nothing, the Western tourists, in most cases, you think: Well, they're not so pleasant to look at, perhaps they should cover up a bit more.

Is it the human conflict that interested you?
Yes, exactly. I think one of my main subjects has always been conflict. Also the dichotomy of good and evil existing in the same place at the same time. Whether it's bunnies being gang-raped in the most beautiful bucolic landscape on a day with scudding clouds and sunshine or something like this. And I was really struck by the hardness of the figures around her that were just watching. I've almost always included watching figures in my paintings, from the year dot.

Where did you get the idea to work in this large triptych format?
I always work on many things at once. I change the scale all the time, working from very large to very small. I think every young artist wants to work as big as they can as soon as they have a decent sized studio. I feel like my work's just gradually got bigger and bigger, until I realised a couple of years ago that it's probably much harder to work on a smaller scale, so I went very small. I find it more conducive to making paintings that work if many things are going on at the same time. *Where, When, How Often and with Whom* was the second I made on this scale, which are the largest paintings of my life, and actually the biggest that I can fit into my studio. The first is called *A Day! Help! Help! Another Day!*, which is taken from an Emily Dickinson title. When working on a large scale like this, I'm very free to go with the momentum of the painting – the painting has to tell me what to do. The painting is more or less in charge. It's always a back and forth, as most painters know – putting something down and then not just going along in a linear way and pursuing what you thought you wanted to do but seeing what the painting throws back at you. I paint quite fast. Not that I finish a painting fast, but the physical act is fast. I make decisions on the fly and most of my painting decisions are made while I'm physically moving paint around. I found that working on this scale was incredibly exciting. One was involved in the painting in a performative way, far more than with any other scale. You really had to be up and down the ladder, and back and forth. It was a very physical activity. People forget how physical painting is, even medium-sized and small ones. But it's this marriage of your brain and your body. When you go into the studio in the morning, you have to feel that you've got the physical energy to take it on. And if you haven't, then you should do something else. You have to be very present, physically. Over the years, I've thought more and more that painting is closest to both dance and poetry.

Cecily Brown in her studio, New York, 2018

How did you come up with the title,* Where, When, How Often and with Whom*?
I have lists of titles going back years of things that I think I might want to use at some point. I've had *Where, When, How Often and with Whom* written down for a little while. And it seemed appropriate. But one reason I liked it very much for this painting was the Gauguin association, not a physical resemblance to his painting, but I'd always loved that Gauguin title, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* I didn't want to steal the title altogether, but I like the fact that it's a series of questions. In a way, it's nonsensical, which I also go towards a lot with titles. They're very rarely descriptive, and I try to avoid descriptive titles. I like being light with the titles, especially if the paintings sometimes get overly morbid.

It's a very open title, beginning with what sounds like questions. Only there's no question mark – and no answers.
Obviously paintings are always asking questions, and each painting asks its own set of questions. Every few moves you make, you've set up a whole set of new problems that you then have to answer and deal with. I want to leave

that openness. The whole nature of my work is that there's this openness and that the questions are unanswered.

So you aim for the openness both with regard to titles and the painting?
Yes. I've always preferred starting a painting to the dreadful state of trying to finish it. There's a flow and an ease at the beginning, where everything is kind of thrilling. Every avenue is new, and you don't know what's about to happen. I don't want anything to be too resolved. That's probably my main formal issue, that balancing of having something there but not too there, but there enough. I started saying a couple of years ago, "I don't finish, I just stop," because it's a moment where you say: I'm going to stop now. It's not that it's finished. The compelling thing is that it's not at all predetermined. Apart from the colour. I pick the colour very deliberately. I try to be very slow and decisive about the palette, otherwise, every colour in the world enters in within the first days. So, I try to be very disciplined about when I allow a colour to enter.

In an interview with the Louisiana Channel from a couple of years ago you mentioned that you like the point between figuration and abstraction and that you try to avoid explaining to people what happens in your pictures.
Sometimes I go further into abstraction than either I mean to, or I realise, and I think it's very different if you're the person painting it – you know all the figural things that you put in there. With every stroke, I always feel like I'm making something figurative. If I feel I'm getting lost in a painting, I'll make myself think of the form again. It's almost like trying to remember someone's face and then letting your mind drift. Painting is very much about how much you drift and how much you come back to the form. And the concentration disperses and then it's diffused, and maybe something else starts going on. I have to feel like I'm pursuing something when I paint. The minute I'm not thinking of something specific, whether it's someone's arm or leg, or a church in the distance, or a ladder, or a pair of glasses, it becomes masturbatory paint that's only about itself.

You mention your lists of titles, and you call your titles "light". Could you explain how you work with titles?
Nearly every title is taken from something existing. The very first time I titled paintings was for an exhibition in the late 90s, where I named all the paintings after movie musicals like *High Society*, *The Pyjama Game*, and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. I liked the idea that they were gaudy and bawdy. It was really right for the body of work because they were very bright and chaotic, very much like a Busby Berkeley song and dance routine, maybe with a hand grenade thrown into it. 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. I liked the idea that a painting could contain all these things at once. This is the strength of a painting – it never has to be one note, it can be a drama, a comedy, a tragedy, hilarious and ridiculous all at once. It really is a great stage. It's this fixed object, but it can be read in many ways, and have many moods or atmospheres – you can gauge many possible meanings from different readings of the imagery. I never wanted to use any film titles after about 1950. I didn't really want my peers to know the movie well, because I wanted it to be suggestive rather than descriptive. It wasn't as if I'd find a title of a musical then watch the musical and see if it had anything to do with the painting. It was very much finding something that already existed, that belonged in a parallel world. For example the painting titled *Can-Can*, it doesn't mean that there are girls with their legs in the air. It was more the sensation of a can-can. Of course it was like a can-can as well. So *Can-Can* was the beginning, and it was so freeing. After that I went to just song titles, and for the next few years, everything was named either after a film, a play or a song. Those early years were the best in a way, because I used up most of the best titles in the first five years, and after that it became harder and harder. I've used names of perfumes, nonsense spam, pub names. Now, I've had to resort to poetry and the Bible! It's not that I was having a religious moment. It was more that I was desperate, that I felt I'd used up all the outside sources I possibly could. I'd come to the end of my title list that I had kept for so many years. And I can't remember what made me stumble on thinking of using the Bible, but it worked well for a while. For years, I wanted to avoid poetry as well. When I

Carnival + Lent

♡ Precious Bane * Sarn Mere

Name That Tune

Be Nice to the Big Blue Sea

Never Trouble Trouble

All the Nightmares Came Today

Way Beyond Compare

Are you weary, are you languid?

Jimmy Jimmy

* Lady with a Little Dog

Poison

Fracas

Bandit

Envy

Where there Jicky

Hollyhocks that Aim too High

(Shadow Burn)

If Paradise were Half as Nice ♫

Holiday

Justify My Love,

Girl on a Swing

Girl Eating Birds

I will not paint any more boring leaves.....

1000 Thread Count

Madrepora (s) (Marcel Marcel)

Madrepora (shipwreck) etc

The Pyjama Game

High Society

Can-Can

* Tender is the Night

Grave suave singing with

The Girl who had Everything!

Blood Thicker than Mud

BOY TROUBLE (s)

Girl Trouble

The Green Green Grass of Home

Father of the Bride

(not the Steve Martin remix)

Luck just Kissed You Hello

TORCH

YUK

& Keychains + Snowstorms

Is it Nice in your Snowstorm?

The Beautiful + Damned

(The Baptism)

The Sleep Around. The Lost + Found

The Butcher. The Policeman

These Foolish Things

We Think the Same Things at the Same Time

New Face in Hell

Dogpatch Heiress

There's no right way to do me wrong.

Carnival Traffic

No You for Me

British People in Hot Weather

Candy

Sweetie

Suddenly Last Summer

New Loafers Louboutin Pumps

Combing the Hair(s)

(Cote d'Azur, Miami, in the garden)

Shipwreck(s)

FUNNY CRY HAPPY

Black Friday

No Room for the Groom

Serenade

Spree

Name That Tune

Unfurl the Flag

Canopy

Couple

The Girl and Goat

The Fox + Geese

Armed + Fearless

Looking very good vermeil cone

This is fun fun

Song + Sugar + Fire

When Time Ran Out

Rush the Night Prowlers

Where Every Season Smiles

Skulldiver (s)

Unbent by wind.

Unchilled by snows

An Exhortation

Banquet

Picnic

The Quick One

Dodgy

B.F.F.

Frenchy & Park

HA HA FRESH

Cruel Frederick

Make it Rain

A Yankee in King Arthur's Court

Summer Storm

The Sick Leaves

Love me till Tuesday

The Year of the Scavenger

Lady Luck

A Swan Comforting a Snake

S.A.P.

L.C.V.

Sick Mood at Sunset. The Sea + the Mirror

Performance

ODE to the WEST WIND

A Day! Help! Help! Another Day!

Beach Blanket Babylon

A Sublime Misadventure (J.S.)

Thanks Roody Hooster

Tripe with Lemons

Sirens + Shipwrecks + Bathers + the Band

In the Midst of Wild Quietness

Cold walls, hot spaces (wild mouths)

Black Painting(s)

Red Painting(s)

Spread from Cecily Brown's notebook

was younger I thought that was much too corny and romantic. I think now I have embraced that I am just a romantic painter. I've now almost used every title I possibly can from Emily Dickinson.

You could also have taken the easy modernist way out by just naming your paintings 'Untitled'?

Titles are basically for other people and for identifying the paintings. At the very beginning, I never titled anything. I title because I'm lucky enough to have things that go into the world, and one wants to be able to talk about them, "this one versus that one." I'd made dozens of small paintings over the years that I'd never thought of titling as I went along, they were just things I'd made and put in the corner of the studio. Then I did a show of them in New York about three years ago and wanted to title the ones that would be in the book. Now when I see half of them are untitled and half of them have these very sweet titles, I do feel guilty – I feel I should go back and name the others. By the '90s 'Untitled' seemed pretentious, overused, and also hinting too much at the sublime. "This work is so ... I can't possibly attempt to describe it." And many paintings back then were not really untitled – they would be 'Untitled' and then have some great, long, poetic title in brackets. In a way, my frivolous titles were a reaction to that. It was the same as when I started writing just my first name on my canvases, with this sort of girlish flourish of "Cecily." You could have added underneath "age nine and three quarters." I needed the frivolity in order not to be overly portentous, as I was working in this sort of macho tradition – and in order to give myself permission to make this kind of painting. After having been a painter in the early '90s in London, it took me years and years to let go of layers of shame and guilt for all the different things that I was doing wrong. Like painting a figure, painting in oils, painting on rectangles – the painters I liked being too emotional, being too highly-charged. Someone once said to my dad: "Oh, I know why your daughter doesn't really fit with the YBAs, they're cool and she's hot." With the titles I wanted to show that the paintings weren't expressionist – I hate the word in the way it implies that it's expressive of a certain mood, and that mood is probably dark and angry. You can make a gesture or a mark in many kinds of mood. I always wanted to avoid the reading that these gestural marks were expressive of the "dark night of the soul." I wanted to have the dark night of the soul, but along with something like a singing, dancing, 42nd Street.

Cecily Brown in the Two Palms studio, New York, 2018

You call painting "a macho tradition." In what way have you experienced that as a female artist?

I've often been asked these autobiographical questions, like "Who are you in this painting?" With the *Ladyland* women, I didn't really feel I was any of the figures. I felt very much that I was looking at them as much as any man or any person would have been. I'm not trying to make a case for the female gaze. Of course this is told from the point of view of a female, but, as I've said before, I don't feel that I'm painting as a woman, any more than I feel like I'm painting as an English person or painting as a ... When I'm painting, I'm just a painter. It's also been said, quite often, that I paint in the tradition of

these males. I can understand why people want to say that, but from a female point of view I think it's slightly absurd. That I'm taking on the mantle of male painting. That's not why I get up in the morning. I even had a review once that said, "Cecily was on top in this painting," which was really offensive. But, I think one tries to be both and one tries to be everything in the painting.

In our time, though, it may seem difficult just to adopt a general 'human perspective', because the zeitgeist very much is that we have to acknowledge that we are men and women, the different races and so on. How do you relate to that as a painter?

I've always thought painting is something that most humans can relate to, and it's very relatable and easy to understand. I know from experience that any person from any background – for example a person who might come to read your electric meter – might walk into my studio in New York (you know what buildings in New York are like, there's different things on every floor)

Cecily Brown in the Two Palms studio, New York, 2018

bu wouldn't be expecting to walk into a big studio and see all this stuff. It's very gratifying that people who are obviously not from an art background or are not used to looking at art, stand there and look at it, and get something from it. I'm not saying everyone responds, but I think painting is the least elite of all the visual arts anyway. You stick most kids in front of a painting and they'll find they have something to say and something to look at.

I think it's a huge problem in the world that a lot of people – certainly in America – don't realise that museums are for them. That they might not have access, except maybe on school trips. But there's a feeling that museums are for rich people, or white people. Not that this is something that everyone can come and see and get something from. They may not always find themselves represented. I just read a line last night by Steinbeck about not finding yourself represented. When someone feels they're not being spoken to, if they aren't represented, it might be harder to find a way in for them. If you're black and you go to the Louvre and the only black people in there are servants. It's a bit like Hollywood. You don't want to only be shown as an extra in the background.

You've talked about the morbidity in your work. Where does all the morbidity or the darkness of your paintings come from – is it from somewhere inside you or from outside?

The world's in a worse state right now than it has been in my lifetime. In a way, it has only heightened things that were already there. It's not that they were in my character, but all that's going on at the moment, which is horrifying, in politics, and the way people are treating each other around the world, unfortunately, is nothing really new. It's never been as close to me as it is at the moment because of where I live. I have very rarely let current events enter my work before. And even in the triptych we just discussed, it's not there in an overt way. I did try to paint the burkini woman in an overt way also. But I want it to be more general – not tied to one specific event. I certainly use subjects that are about humans' vileness to one another, and the atrocities people can commit. The horror of the world, I think, has been there in my work from the beginning. Part of my attraction to older paintings is that the most terrible subjects on earth are depicted. I love paintings

of Hell. I always liked the expression "the Devil has all the best tunes." I always find that I go to a depiction of Hell and look at it for an hour and then look at Heaven for 30 seconds.

You are very often generous in terms of citing your sources. Some of your drawings are titled 'after Bosch' or 'after Hogarth' and so on.
The whole point of it is that I'm figuring something out and, by copying a work, you internalise it and get to know it so well. It will be useful to me later on. You just learn so much from copying a Hogarth or a Bruegel. And it's also very challenging technically – just keeping your eye and hand and mind very precise, because you have to get those things in the right place, and they're very complex. They're great for teaching you about complexity and composition.

Is that a way of saying that the grand narratives and the great tales of man are still relevant today?
That's what art is for, isn't it? To not just talk about them, but to process them, to show there's a continuum for hundreds of years of people going through similar things. There's a solace in feeling that we're going through similar things. It's perhaps reassuring to know this has happened before. Everything old is new again.

And an artist in a studio is a very solitary figure. There's something completely archaic about the artist in the studio. Géricault, Bosch and Hogarth were also just standing in front of a canvas.
This is one of the things I've always thought – that my problems really aren't so different from Bosch's. The day-to-day, the making of the image. To go back to what you said before about the whole taking-on of these old guys: it's more of a conversation with them than a competition, though I am very competitive with the dead artists, and that's why I'll never be satisfied. And, of course, I'm going to take from everyone who I go and look at, and use them. I need to respond to the art that I look at. So in a way my paintings are my reply. To go back to painting being a question, and art being a question, I want to talk back.

Cecily Brown in the Two Palms studio, New York, 2018