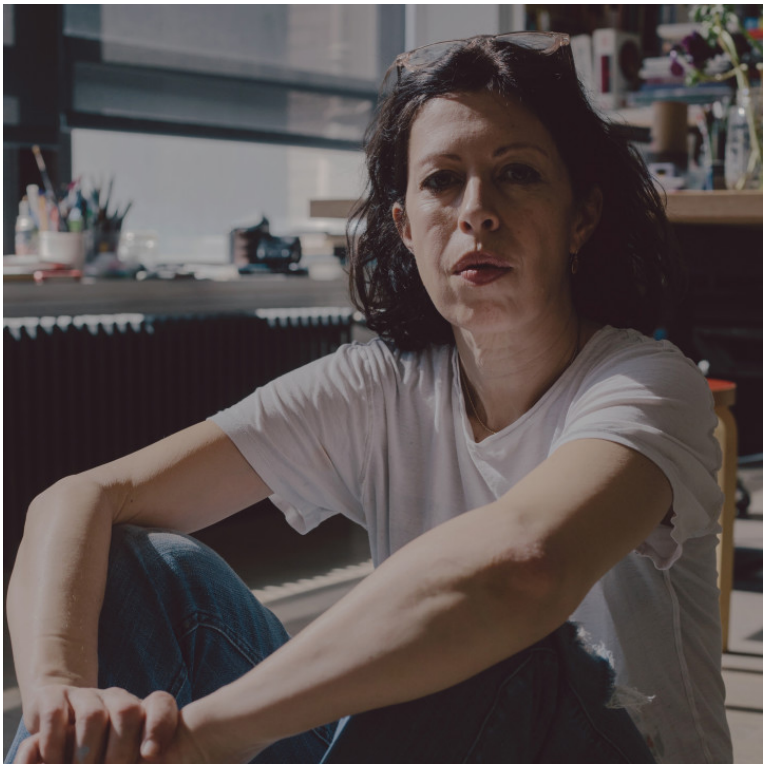
Quinn, Annalisa. "Cecily Brown: 'No work by a living artist should be more than $1m'. *Financial Times Magazine – Visual Arts,* April 10, 2020

FINANCIAL TIMES

Cecily Brown: 'No work by a living artist should be more than $1m'



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The painter on sexism, subverting Englishness and the dangers of treating art solely as capital

The painter Cecily Brown dislikes the word feelings.

It is mushy, imprecise, American. Other words she would never apply to her work include moods, emotions, dark and expressionist. Sitting in her New York studio a few weeks ago, I get the sense that they don't convey the appropriate rigour.

Painting, the British-born artist explains, pushing her glasses impatiently to the top of her head, is not supposed to be therapeutic. "That's why I have a therapist. I don't want the viewer to have to deal with my feelings." Her work is about ideas, even if they are not explicable ideas but what she calls "painting ideas".

Brown, 51, is oil-flecked and distractible. ("Sorry, what was the question?") But you can see that quality of rigour in the ruthless way she destroys works that are not up to her standard: she slices them with a razor, then peels them from

their stretchers and shreds them with scissors. (One early critic, Jerry Saltz, wrote that her erotic paintings look like centrefolds "put through a wood chipper" — little did he know.)

"People imagine that you're in this frenzy, but it is much more controlled," says Brown. She is sometimes said to straddle figuration and abstraction, but often it is her paintings' sheer density that makes them seem abstract. From a distance, bodies merge and meld kaleidoscopically but, up close, they click into place: a woman, a boar, a deer. This process acts as an interpretive speed bump: Brown makes you take your time with her work.

Brown in her New York studio – 'I can't come in here painting, thinking, "Oh, this is worth . . . " I like to destroy work. I don't think, "This could be $350,000" before I slash it' © Nathan Bajar for the FT

We met in early March, before New Yorkers were ordered to stay at home on account of coronavirus. But the city was already beginning to empty. Walking into her Union Square studio felt like stepping from a quiet train on to a teeming platform. Underfoot were dried paints, books, scattered printouts, a cigarette butt, a bounding cockapoo, some paintings that could potentially sell for millions.

Brown's works are distinctive for their physicality and sweep. On the walls, bodies writhe and contort across enormous canvases: they could be battles, or orgies, or hunts. ("I haven't painted orgies in 30 years," she says indignantly. "Well, maybe it's a bit less than that.")

Educated at London's Slade School of Fine Art, Brown moved to New York in 1994 and was taken on at the age of 29 by the legendary art dealer Larry Gagosian. Recent shows include a retrospective at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark and an installation at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, which consisted of two massive paintings of swirling, purgatorial cocktail parties to mirror and mock the city's opera-going elite.

Today, she is one of the only female painters whose works sell in the seven figures. Her painting "Suddenly Last Summer" (1999) went for $6.8m at auction in 2018, and "Confessions of a Window Cleaner" (2000-01) for $3.6m last year.

Brown's Union Square studio space is teeming with books, print-outs and paintings that could potentially sell for millions © Nathan Bajar for the FT

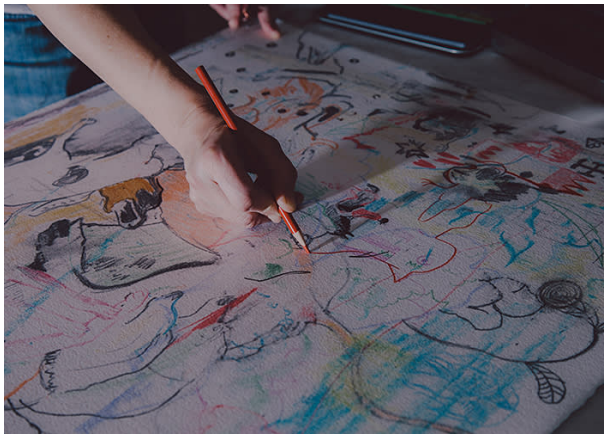
"I don't actually think any work of art by a living artist should be more than a million dollars," she says, wary of a market that treats art as if it were mere capital. "I think it's sick. It's out of control. It's about big-dick contests and it's about all the wrong things."

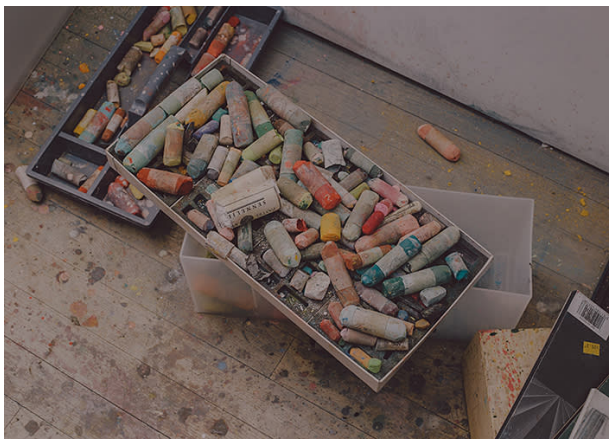
She is also aware of a danger in thinking too much about the money. "I can't come in here painting, thinking, 'Oh, this is worth . . . ' " she waves her hand. "I like to destroy work. I don't think, 'This could be $350,000' before I slash it."

Brown grew up in Surrey, in the "bucolic, gorgeous English 1970s with the occasional little air-raid shelter stuck in the landscape". Her mother is the novelist Shena Mackay, and Brown found out in her twenties that the man who raised her was not her biological father (who turned out to be the art critic David Sylvester). "My parents did a good job of me not knowing that they were not that happy together," she says.

When Brown gave birth to her own daughter Celeste, she was almost 40 and already a successful artist. Brown's mother struggled for money and had three children by the time she was 25; in contrast, Brown jokes that Celeste has mostly been raised by the nanny: "That's why she's so lovely."

Later, she emails to make sure I know it was a joke: "I'm aware that sometimes seeing something in print makes it sound different from how it was said."





Brown sketches slow, intentional lines on a canvas © Nathan Bajar for the FT. Right, Her collection of soft pastels © Nathan Bajar for the FT

I can see why Brown doesn't always recognise herself in print: she speaks a bit like how she paints, not in definite statements but an accumulation of thoughts, jokes and images that are overlaid, that correct, contextualise and revise each other, so that the real answer is the jumble, not the brush stroke.

She also has reason to be wary of the press. When she started out, Brown was written about with a now-startling combination of prurience and viciousness. She recalls one Artnet review that described her painting "Performance", which shows a couple having sex, as "a blinding f**k with Cecily on top".

"'Performance' is a stripped down, get down Brown we pant to see again," wrote the critic Charlie Finch. ("That gross guy who you're probably fortunate enough not to know," she mutters.)

The same year, The New York Times ran a piece called "Art Girls Just Wanna Have Fun", which referred to her as "a studio voluptuary". The author complained that there was "something girlish about an artist who signs her pictures Cecily (is she in grade school?)".

"I think it made me incredibly self-conscious," Brown says, picking up a pencil and drawing slow, intentional lines in her sketchbook. "I just tried to get a thicker skin really, but I think it makes you want to prove yourself more, to show that you're not an It Girl, you know?"

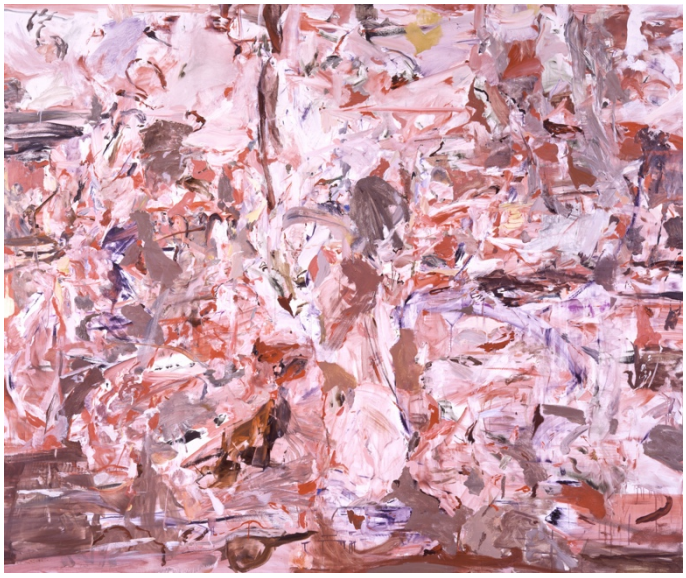
One result of this early attention is an enduring caution with female bodies, particularly any that could seem to represent the artist. "I think I was scared off doing erotic paintings because of those readings," she says.

But she has recently begun, cautiously, to put hints of herself into her work. Brown points to an unfinished painting on the wall of a woman seated at a vanity table alone, as "a kind of self-portrait", she says.

The subject's expression is impossible to read.

She also seems to insert herself into her work in slyer ways. A spaniel sits in the bottom right corner of each canvas in her new series of hunt paintings, watching the proceedings with a pert, authorial intelligence.

When she was a child, Brown says, she was preoccupied with the idea of subjectivity: "I was obsessed with the idea of trying to draw what it really looked like when you can see your own eyelashes and nose. And if only you could include that in the painting!"

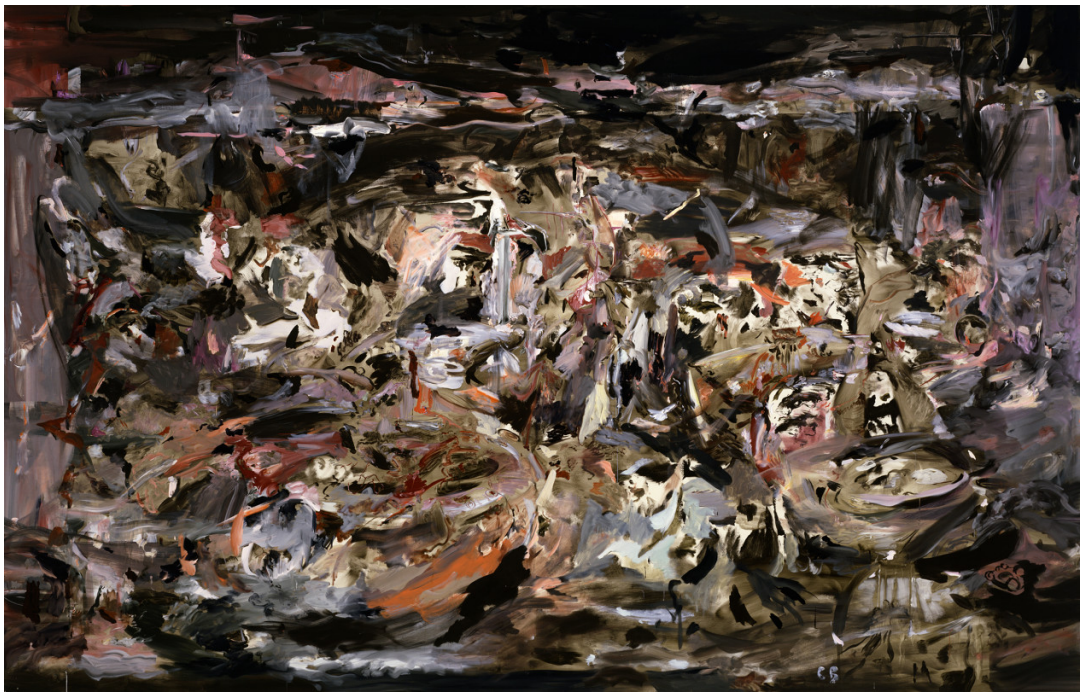


'Confessions of a Window Cleaner', 2000-01

Though she has lived in New York for decades and is married to an American, the architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, Brown has been thinking lately about the country of her birth. Would she ever move back to England? I ask. "I'm very tempted sometimes, but . . . " She stops herself. "I don't really want to talk about politics in the Financial Times because such serious people read it."

She was invited to put on a show at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire this spring ("They dangle an aristocrat at you," she explains, referring to Edward Spencer-Churchill, brother of Blenheim's resident duke), for which she created a raft of new works reflecting on the idea of Englishness.

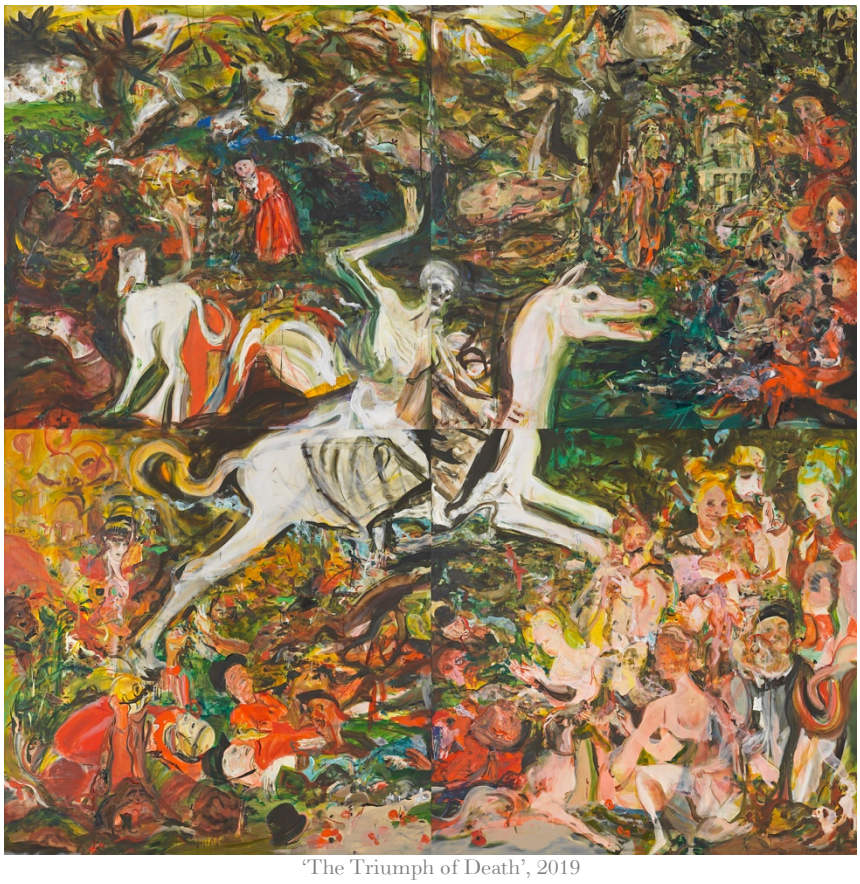
The palace is temporarily closed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the works are now in storage, but they have sparked larger thematic shifts in her work.



'Thriller', 2009

Brown wanted to make paintings that would blend in at Blenheim. They sport hunts and horses, lords and ladies cavorting with her signature underlying qualities of distortion and violence. In exhibition mock-ups, her works half-rhyme with the other, older canvases in their midst. A horse's back, warped and echoed. An armorial, or roll of arms, that she has copied — in her version, the colours run together and the lines waver, as if the whole thing is beginning to melt.

"I like the way that I'm infiltrating," says Brown. Visitors would be looking for Reynolds or van Dyck "and then, before they know it, they're looking at something brutal".

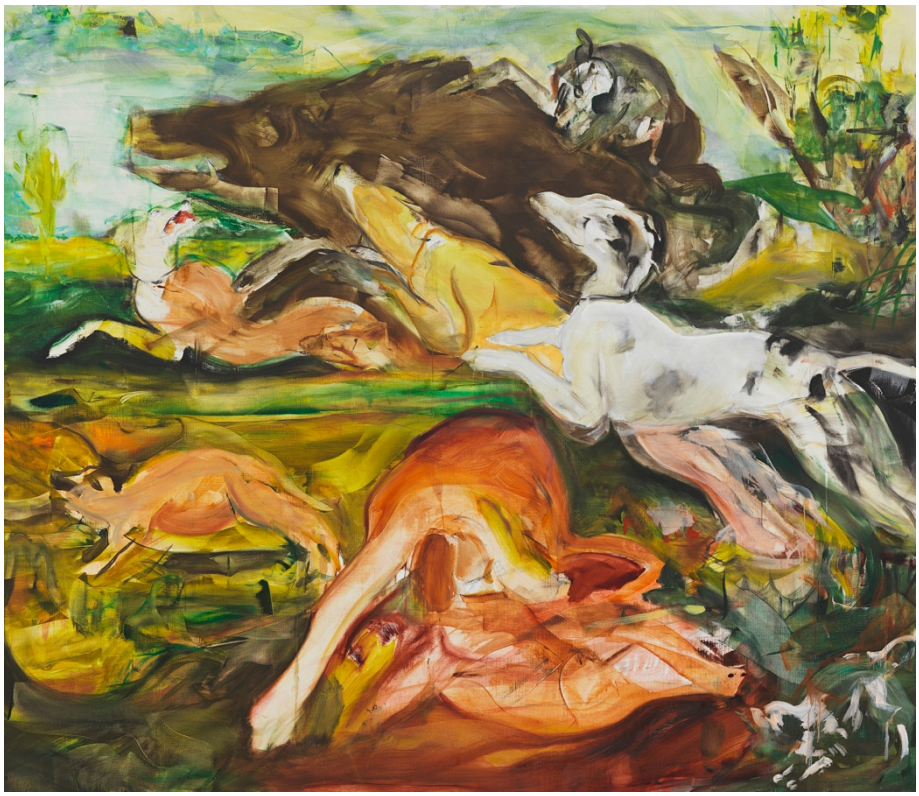


'The Triumph of Death', 2019

Hunts, in particular, caught her imagination, for the way they marry the idyllic and the cruel. One of the works in the show, "Hunt After Frans Snyders", is saturated with home-counties green. It shows a boar, blank-eyed with terror, chased by dogs. A tangled, indeterminate carcass lies in the foreground. You can discern a haunch, perhaps a throat.

"My favourite things are to paint movement, figures in motion, and then tension and violence, but excitement and colour," Brown says. "So the hunt gives everything. And then also, I'm a huge animal lover. I hate the idea of hunting. So then I think it's inevitably going to have some of that feeling" — she stops herself at the hateful word — "or heat".

For Brown, the border between abstraction and figuration is a contested, delicate one: the balance needs to be exactly right. "I started playing this game of how little information did you need before filling in the rest?" she explains.



'Hunt After Frans Snyders', 2019

The brain, she says, can work with almost nothing. To make someone see a landscape, "all you need is a splash of blue and a splash of green near each other. And the mind makes up the rest." At the same time, the viewer needs "something to hold on to".

Brown has recently been experimenting with printing her canvases, and occasionally sketches figures in charcoal before painting. But she says she mostly paints from instinct: "I always think of the de Kooning quote of him saying, 'I think I'm painting a picture of two women, but it may turn out to be a landscape.' And that's very much my everyday life, that I try to let the painting go the way it wants."

Still, the evidence of her research is scattered all over the floor: printouts of Snyders' still-life paintings mingle with a picture of mangled Daffy Duck, face and beak recently renovated courtesy of Elmer Fudd. She draws from literature (Günter Grass's The Tin Drum, Precious Bane by Mary Webb), music (the campy patriotism of Vera Lynn) and, of course, other artists. At the moment she is preoccupied with Picasso.

'My favourite things are to paint movement, figures in motion, and then tension and violence, but excitement and colour,' Brown says © Nathan Bajar for the FT

Picasso "invents and invents and invents. And you always feel with him that he's making a new way to say 'a hand', for example, every single time. You'll see 300 drawings and the way he says 'hand' is different in every single one," Brown says.

"There's a shorthand to the way he sees the body that I feel like is almost this . . . this mystery thing." She pauses. "I'm going to embarrass myself when I read this. I'm gonna be like, what was I talking about, mystery thing? Like, f**king shut up. God."

Is it possible that she dislikes hearing her work described as expressive, or speaking about art in emotional terms, because it seems gendered? "Funny, isn't it?" she says. "I can't imagine anyone talking about feelings around Rothko. But what's more feeling-making than Rothko?"

Cecily Brown at Blenheim Palace is postponed. For the latest information on its opening date, visit blenheimartfoundation.org.uk or @blenheimartfoundation on Instagram

All works courtesy of the artist. Images and digital composite of artwork by Genevieve Hanson. Images of artwork by Rob McKeever

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