

King, Emily. "Larger Than Life," *Porter Magazine*, Issue 15, Summer 2016

ART

LARGER than life

Ahead of a new show of CECILY BROWN's vast canvases of abstract erotic scenes, the British painter talks to PORTER about sex, motherhood and escape



Cecily Brown first emerged as an art world star in the 1990s with paintings that teeter beguilingly between figuration and abstraction, depicting bodies in swirls of color and gesture that frequently draw comparison with Willem de Kooning and Francis Bacon. Highly sought after by museums and collectors alike, part of the appeal of her oversized canvases is the way their expressive forms take shape gradually and disperse before your eyes.

Born in London in 1969, Brown moved to New York in 1994, where she still lives with her husband and daughter. Over the last two decades, her career has grown exponentially, which explains why her departure from the Gagosian Gallery empire in May 2015 generated so much art-world chatter. This summer she is having her first show with the well-regarded Thomas Dane Gallery in London.



ON SEX AS A SUBJECT

"When I was young and naïve, straight out of art school, I thought sex was the great subject. It was very much my subject, but it really pissed me off when people insisted that I had 'hidden' sex in my paintings. I didn't hide the sex, it's just that things become more – or less – visible in the process. I'd say I was naïve, because I thought people would be able to look past the subject to the painterly qualities, but they couldn't at all. I used to overhear people saying, 'Oh, I found it,' in front of my paintings. Ever since, I've been trying to confound that. It's not a peep show, there isn't a dirty bit lurking there."

MY WORKING PROCESS

"Recently I have been doing much faster paintings that only take a few days, instead of a few months. They are my favorites because they seem really fresh. In my studio I can have a

lot of paintings out at one time, and I work back and forth between them. I am prolific, but I do edit a lot and I also keep a lot of my paintings. I make way more than I 'release'. Do I spoil things? Oh God yes, all the time, but paintings that I thought I had spoiled can also become favorites. It's a game, and sometimes getting annoyed by a canvas can be helpful."

ON WORKING FROM DIFFERENT HISTORICAL SOURCES

"I've recently been using images of paradise. I had quite a few by different artists, including one of Noah's Ark by Jacob Savery, and something interesting started to happen. I would be painting from one image and then I'd leave it on the other side of the room, and I would go back and accidentally start painting from another. It would be a few minutes before I'd realize that I was working from the wrong source."

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



WORK OF ART
from far left: Cecily
Brown in her studio
in Manhattan; *One
Life to Live*, 2014;
work in progress at
Brown's studio

ON THE PHYSICAL SIDE OF PAINTING
“For me, painting is probably most similar to dance, in terms of muscle memory, but the result is probably most like poetry. Ten years ago I was at the gym five days a week and I was much more careful about what I ate, but I’ve stopped bothering. I’ve realized that it is painting that keeps me the fittest.”

ON PORTRAITURE
“I have always gone by the rule that you paint what you want to see. That’s why I don’t paint portraits: I do not want to see a clunky portrait by me of anyone. I don’t think it would add anything to portraiture, or art, or the



world. I haven’t painted my daughter at all and sometimes I think, ‘Oh, I should have at least tried when she was baby,’ but I didn’t have that desire. For me it is about the mixture of imagination and copying, or stealing.”

ON BEING A MOTHER
“My daughter is seven now and I work out time in my studio in relation to her. By having a kid, I feel I am more involved in the world, more normal. Now I have to conform to school hours and weekends, and I actually go on holiday. I do think

letting that into my life has been helpful to my work.”

TALKING ABOUT MY WORK
“It is always tricky talking about my painting. I don’t want it to be mysterious, but I don’t know if it’s worth going over a painting and saying, ‘Well, I was thinking of a dog here.’ There is nearly always something specific in my mind as I make a mark, it usually refers to something. My whole obsession over the past 20 years has been trying to look at something and hold it. But there is an impossibility to that. There is a slippage inherent in trying to fix an image.”

private views

Fantastic Man William Onyeabor

This song is about a guy who is always telling a woman she’s beautiful and amazing, while he asks: “When are you going to tell me I’m a fantastic man?” It’s a song that has great rhythm, plus it’s really humorous.

Isobel Björk

This is one of my favorite Björk songs, it is so strange and beautiful. I love the string arrangement, it reminds me of something you would hear in a Bollywood film.

PORTER playlist... **CORINNE BAILEY RAE**

The British soul singer-songwriter best known for her jazz-layered anthems shares the tunes that make her happy



Corinne Bailey Rae in the studio

I Feel For You Chaka Khan

This song has such a great feeling, Chaka’s voice is so joyous! I like to play it when I’m getting ready for a night out.

Alright Kendrick Lamar

Lamar has changed the album form forever. This rap song is a great way into *To Pimp a Butterfly*, it’s an important political message about life today.

Corinne Bailey Rae’s new album, *The Heart Speaks in Whispers*, is out now (Good Groove / Virgin EMI)

SEE IT. SCAN IT. SHOP IT. ▣

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