

INTERVIEW: DEBORAH BROWN

James Barron: Had you done this walk with Trout many times before COVID? Were you seeing things more clearly when your life had slowed down, as it had for all of us?

Deborah Brown: I had done this walk with Trout before, and I've been familiar with my neighborhood for a long time. During COVID, I started spending a lot more time in the neighborhood than I had before. All our lives slowed down, and the number of activities we could do was so restricted. Cabin fever led me to take Trout on a lot of walks. A fortuitous sighting of my shadow on the street with her in the winter of last year led me to take a photograph on my phone, and then I put it away for a little bit. But not for too long – I saw this as a possible subject matter. It was reflective of the isolation and reduced circumstances we were all feeling because of COVID. That image seemed more charged than it would have at another time.

JB: This body of work really resonates with the viewer. There are two protagonists in the paintings. There's you and there's Trout, and we're looking at you looking at your shadows, and you even pull us into the painting with the leash. When the leash comes out of the picture plane and into our space, it's almost like we are actually holding Trout.

DB: I think that's why people like this work. You're the protagonist, too – the third protagonist. And rather than even being an observer, you're the other self-figure in the work, because the figure is not depicted as a particular age or sex or race. It could really be anyone. People send me their pictures of their shadows, sometimes with their dogs, and sometimes just them. It's of a confirmation that I'm changing the way people are seeing that everyday experience; it becomes part of their seeing and vocabulary. They can narrate their own story around this very common visual.

JB: The paintings are set in an urban environment, but there's an unusual sense of solitude. There's also a sense of a low horizon that feels almost like the Netherlands, or how de Kooning sometimes had low horizons. Is that something you think about in this particular urban environment?

DB: It's a unique area. I'm so close to Manhattan in East Williamsburg, in an industrial business zone where the height restrictions on the buildings are traditionally very low. You have a lot of one-story warehouses, and there are long vistas where you can see in several directions at once. That's unusual for a very urban environment. And the presence of all the street graffiti makes you realize you're not in the country; you're in a place where there are diverse groups of people, and they're expressing their presence through these symbols and signs. You have the traditional Apollonian structures of the street, the grid, the buildings, the light stanchions, the stop signs, along with this kind of Dionysian graffiti. The graffiti is another character in the paintings and references people outside the frame, who are also makers. Those juxtapositions create another narrative that's accompanying the protagonist, as this person goes to the neighborhood. These are things that I respond to in my neighborhood, and that many people can relate to from other urban environments they have been in.

JB: You talked about people sending pictures of their own dogs with their own shadows. It's something I felt strongly during COVID: that we were all isolated, but we were connected, and that we were perhaps more open and empathetic than we might have been before. I've been worrying about people "returning to normal." I'm hoping there's going to be a new normal.

DB: When you feel things in a really acute way – like in the early stages of COVID, not just the isolation, but the fear and the uncertainty – your internal world is always kind of heightened or mirrored in your surroundings. I saw an environment that was cleared out and devoid of people, except these tiny little figures sometimes at the other end of the street. That's the reference to German expressionism, where you have these crazy perspectives, and then the notations of other figures in the distance or at the end of a block. The landscape became a reflection of internal feelings heightened by the pandemic.

JB: There seems to be a relationship with German expressionism, and maybe expressionism in general. It's intriguing that your paintbrush went so much towards expressionism at such an ominous and terrifying moment.

DB: The comparison with German expressionism is an apt one. That's work that I deeply esteem, and I feel a formal and psychological connection to it. It's such a product of an urban environment, this new urbanism. Berlin was the place everybody wanted to be. There was a lot of social interaction with culture and performance and being out in the street. That was a time when you wanted to be out mingling with other people. I take a lot of inspiration from that work, but the zeitgeist was completely different. During COVID, there was the imperative to social distance. There's a connection to this history of the representation of people in an urban space through German expressionism, but then our time had a different protocol because of the virus.

JB: There's a funny thing. My brother is an ultra-Orthodox, Hasidic Jew living in a gated community in Jerusalem. He's brilliant guy; a Milton scholar, was going for a degree at Berkeley, and then he went to Israel and changed his life in 1986. During COVID, he said, "James, if you're not seeing the beauty in this, if you're not seeing the gifts that are coming out of this, it means you're not really looking." These paintings are an obvious gift from the quarantine.

DB: For me, COVID had positive sides. It completely eliminated any other distractions. For artists, if you were able to work, it was actually a wonderful time of no distractions. I pushed myself harder and harder to confront a kind of authenticity in my work, and to raise the standards as high as I could. I had always been very ambitious, but this gave me free rein to be as tough on myself as I needed to be to make my work that much better.

JB: We've spoken about German expressionism, but they feel very American to me. I think of Fairfield Porter, especially his Amherst paintings in relation to your paintings that include gingko trees, in a really beautiful way. I feel an affinity.

DB: My husband went to Amherst, so I know the parking lots and buildings Porter painted. Some of them are still there. I love those colors: that kind of Ultramarine sour blue of the sky, and the orange and chrome yellows that he got, especially because I think he did them in the

fall. They're just particular colors that reference a certain time of year, and that really comes from Matisse. You're not just using light and dark and value to indicate the light. It's colored light. It's in the world, but you're creating it through pigment.

JB: Porter's point of reference came out of Bonnard and Vuillard, and if you look at certain passages in some of your trees, I do see those two artists and also the color values.

DB: I'm a student, as I think many artists are, of other people's work and the history of Western art. I have many loves. What's great about being an older artist is that if you follow your path, and kind of ride hard on yourself, you incorporate some of those things in a way that is your own. You're making paintings that people recognize as yours, but they're informed by this knowledge and deep research and understanding of past work that you love. I think that's what we all strive for, as artists. You want to be in dialogue, but you don't want to be subsumed by another person's vision.

JB: It's interesting that you use the word "old." I see your experience, but I don't feel how many paintings you've painted to get to this point. They feel very youthful to me. They feel exuberant and filled with sort of a wonder that feels anything but old.

DB: That's a wonderful compliment. Thank you for that. When you're lucky enough to arrive at your vision, the work should express those feelings of discovery and wonder and confidence. I winnowed away a lot of extraneous things and arrived at the subject of the work, I have the means and ability to make it, and I feel grateful for that. When I say old, I don't use a lot of pop culture references, and my work isn't from the internet. It's not sourced from "mediated images." There's a whole bunch of work and younger artists who were nurtured by that, and whose work derives from that. I'm just not in that world. I think there is a generational difference, where perhaps I'm not seeing as others do.

JB: Is there a usual time of day that you take photographs during these walks?

DB: I took Trout for a walk every morning. The winter paintings have really elongated shadows from the low angle of the sun in the morning. But I've done these for a year now, so they encompass all four seasons in New York. Not only have the shadows changed, but the colors too. I started incorporating some of the flowering trees in the spring. There are some amazing trees, even in this desolate neighborhood, that turned bright pink. They have fantastic colors. And then in the fall, the Ginkgo trees turned bright yellow. I've tried to reference the change in seasons by changing the color schemes too, and in the summer, I was photographing some at night, when the colors were more orange and chrome yellow. There were a lot of variables that changed as I observed the change of the seasons as I went through a whole year of these paintings.

James D. Barron
January 2022