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Practice Makes Perfect at Drawing Center Exhibit

'Rehearsal' highlights the sketches that helped painter Cecily Brown hone her craft



Cecily Brown's 'Untitled (Ladyland)' (2012) is part of 'Rehearsal,' an exhibition opening Friday at the Drawing Center in SoHo. PHOTO: GENEVIEVE HANSON

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Artist Cecily Brown has shown paintings in museums and top gallery shows world-wide. "Rehearsal," an exhibition opening Friday at the Drawing Center in SoHo, brings to light a different kind of work—unseen, until now, outside her studio.

For the show, Ms. Brown assembled more than 80 drawings and sketchbooks filled with the daily doings of an artist searching for lessons in gestures and lines.

“What you see is her process of learning how to look,” said Claire Gilman, the Drawing Center’s senior curator and the organizer of the show.

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“I go through phases when I draw every day for weeks or months,” said Ms. Brown, who has found inspiration in sources ranging from old masters to erotica to soccer photography. “I copy things

again and again as a way of understanding. It’s like learning a dance.”

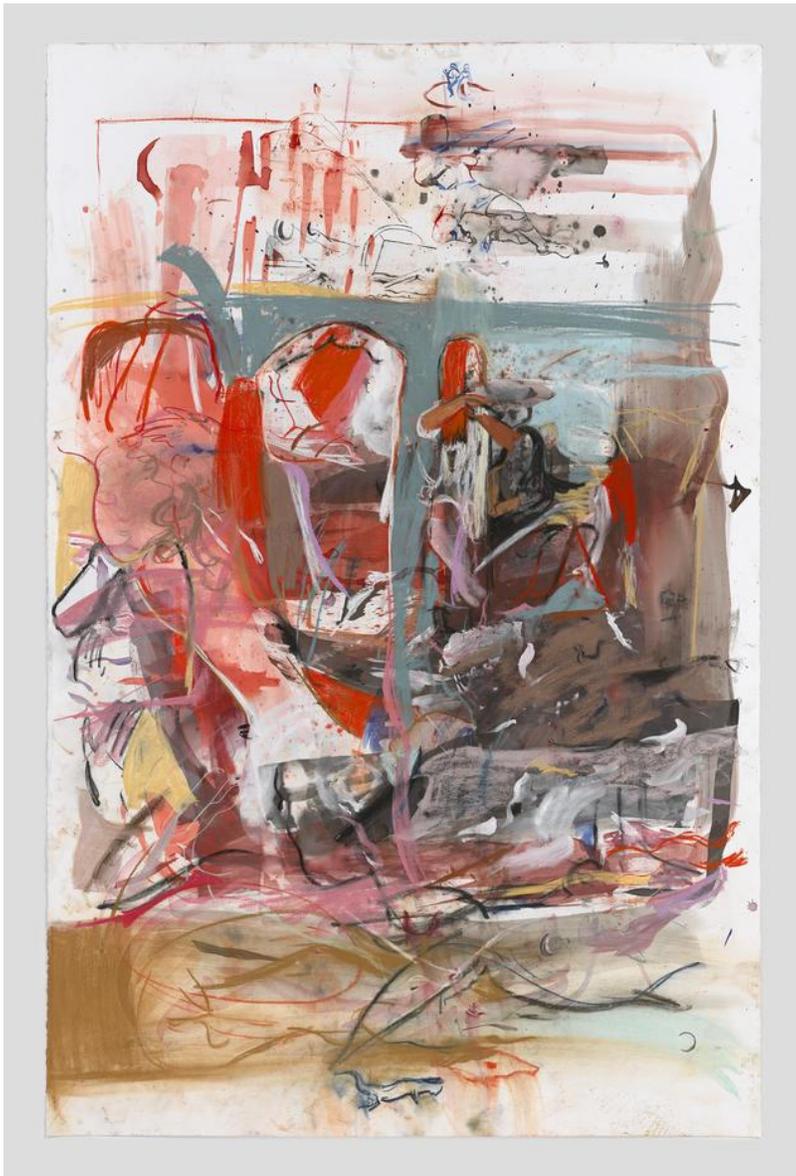
Her dramatic oil paintings, abstract but with hints of figures and things writhing beneath the surface, derive in part from what Ms. Brown called her “information-gathering drawings.”

“I remember making these, broke and alone with a ballpoint pen in a tiny little studio,” Ms. Brown said of early drawings from the late 1990s. She was new to New York then, from London, and supported herself with waitressing work.

Favored sources for imitation included the 19th-century Spanish artist Francisco Goya and Franz von Bayros, an early-20th-century “decadent art” illustrator of pornographic scenes.

“They’re drippingly beautiful, erotic but so stylized, sometimes violent but with this incredibly tender and quite sweet line,” said Ms. Brown.

When not painting, she drew figures in repetitive exercises and combined them in layered groupings that grew abstract.



'Combing the Hair (Beach)' (2015). PHOTO: GENEVIEVE HANSON

“The drawings are prismatic,” said the Drawing Center’s executive director, Brett Littman. “She’s looking at images and rotating them in her mind.”

During the show’s installation this week, Ms. Brown marveled at seeing her private working material—made with pencil, pen, crayon and watercolors—framed for public display.

“You see quite a few footprints because they end up being part of the fabric of the studio,” she said of drawings she often scattered around the floor.

A series of larger pieces, some measuring more than 6 feet in size, include disparate visual quotations and riffs. In one, the beak of a bird and an arm of an odd reptile

creature recall the early Netherlandish fantasias of Hieronymus Bosch. In another, a woman combing her hair alludes to a painting by French master Edgar Degas.

Reading into such private gestures taught Ms. Brown how to look at painting more deeply, she said.



'Untitled (After Bosch and Boldini)' (2015). PHOTO: GENEVIEVE HANSON/CECILY BROWN

“[William] Hogarth would often use animals to deal with sex, so you might have a man and a woman having a polite conversation but then two little scrappy terriers going at it in the corner,” she said of the 18th-century British artist and satirist, another influence in her work.

A very different source, cover art from Jimi Hendrix’s “Electric Ladyland” album, led to enduring lessons. The image of a group of naked women reminded her of a painting by neoclassical French artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Ms. Brown said. She learned a lot by

mimicking its composition—in particular, how to paint a face.

It is a challenge, she said, that vexes painters trying to avoid too much attention on a single figure.

“A crowd of faces helped because it keeps the eye in motion.”

Sean Landers, a fellow artist who has known Ms. Brown since the '90s and shared studio space with her, said drawing seemed integral to the ways her art has evolved.

“It departs from accuracy derived from a source,” he said, “and becomes pure invention.”

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