

Painting and sex have things in common

11 June, 2016 | Jackie Wullschlager

It's two decades since the painter fled London and the 'closed club' of the Young British Artists – and became a star in New York. Over vegetables in Mayfair, she tells Jackie Wullschlager about Proust, the 'physical urge' to paint and why motherhood meant joining the 'human race'

Just after Cecily Brown finished at the Slade art school, she came second in a competition, the John Jones Open. The prize was a plane ticket to New York. It was 1994, the height of the Young British Art boom. Brown, a general, non-conceptual painter, never came back. She returns to London so infrequently that when I invited her to choose a venue for lunch, she had no idea where there, "Nowhere has sentimental value. The first thing I thought of was a vegetarian Indian in Drummond Street where I went as a student when I never had any money, but they don't take bookings."

Eventually she opts for a restaurant she has not visited before: HIX Mayfair in the quintessentially English, mahogany-paneled Brown's Hotel – Agatha Christie was a regular. It is round the corner from Thomas Dane Gallery; Brown is in town for a solo show there, which she calls her "homecoming".

Slight, thin, girlish – she is 46 – in black fleecy jacket and jeans, with dark hair in a ponytail and a pair of delicate mobile features and huge chestnut eyes, she darts in nervously and laughs in surprise that the place is decked out with YBA icons. Tracy Emin's pink neon "I Loved You More Than I Can Love" hangs above the fireplace; Angus Fairhurst's wallpaper depicts a surreal Epping forest.

"What I hated about the YBAs was that it was a closed club, it made me feel I could never be part of this so I may as well lack off halfway into the world," she opens. "I didn't fit in England when I left. You couldn't do what I wanted to do without being attacked. But I was shy. I wouldn't have gone up to Sarah Lucas and said, 'Can I come to the pub with you?' The YBAs I know are all one another's people."

The story of how Brown, the outstanding painter of the YBA generation, became a New York art star – works fetching more than \$1m at auction, taken on her overseas tour by dealer Larry Gagosian, profiled in Vanity Fair magazine – is a celebrity legend. It speaks of America's embrace of the new; of British uneasiness with painting, perhaps even with seriousness. "I'm not ironic. I think that's the thing that separated me from my peers – I was sincere, earnest. I don't know how not to be. It's in better in America because they're very earnest. I felt at home in New York at once."

London, by contrast, "is the most nerve-racking place to show, the audience is very tough here. America never quite seems real even now – England is the harsh reality, America is the fantasy. It's weird being back in England, I don't really quite belong here and I don't really belong in America. I feel at odds about everything. My natural state is being torn, it would be bad for me if I wasn't. If I had to narrow the work to one thing, I would be conflicted. I don't like things to go along too happily." She looks suddenly panicked. "I just feel very nervous! I think I'd like a Bloody Mary! No sex." She looks hastily to the waiter. "In America they put ice in everything, but I think of a Bloody Mary as a soup." I order a glass of champagne to toast the new show.

Brown's monumental canvases, combining abstraction and figuration in brushwork of intense sensuality, evoking yet not defining the human and flesh, certainly respond more to American tradition – Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston – than to British art history. Her daring was to repress the high macho aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism in a conceptual age, and from a perspective of female eroticism. Paintings at Thomas Dane include women bathing with turbulent all over backgrounds: "Darling", "Reclining Nude", the riff on Manet "Boy with a Cat".

I applaud how sexy they are, "skill!" she replies with pleasure. "It's not there in an overt way, but what I want is that feeling, without being explicit about it. Painting and sex have things in common, you have a frustration when you're not doing it, it's a physical urge that can't be fulfilled by anything else. It's really moody if I haven't been painting for a few days."

The show also includes richly allusive paintings that strike me as English pastoral – "Free Games for May" in country garden colours; suggestions of forests, glades, animals in "Paradise (with red and green)" – plus a tense composi-



Lunch with the FT Cecily Brown

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HIX MAYFAIR
Brown's Hotel, 33 Apsom St, London W1

Bottle still water	£5.25
Vegetarian salad	£8
Broccoli with Brown Buffalo egg	£9.50
Vegetarian bubble and squeak	£16
Pan-fried Dover sole	£22.50
Bloody Mary x 2	£32
Champagne glasses x 2	£36
Total (inc service)	£179.16

tion of a figure battling an extravagant, multi-hued deluge of strokes, called "A Yankee in King Arthur's Court", which Brown admits reflects "my split personality, not being at home anywhere", between America and England. In 2015, after "not exactly a midlife crisis but realising one doesn't want always to stay in the same place", she left Gagosian, and this year joined "the very different, more intimate" English gallery Thomas Dane.

We are given the menu and Brown dons big, black thick-rimmed glasses to read it. "I'm not used to wearing these. I don't use them for painting – I quite like to not see very well. I know what I'm doing. It's less astonishing to me now that Degas painted while he was blind. You don't look while you're doing it, it's a combination of intuition and experience. I'm more assured now. Until the mid-thirties it was frustrating, nothing came out as I wanted; the hard thing was to get the paint to go on how I wanted it to, it looked all right when I went on but it got very cakey, like cement. Now, when I reach for the right colour at exactly the right moment, that's when I know I'm going well, that's the feeling I'm striving for. Guston said it beautifully: it's painting itself. It's difficult to talk about without making it sound too spiritually you're in an open state."

She perches at a la carte offerings. "Mmm, isn't the language lovely – purple, sprouting broccoli with brown Buffalo egg sounds so much better than just eggs." We both select this as a starter, then Brown frets: "I worry about newspapers having no money." To reassure her, I order the most expensive option: pan-fried Dover sole. Brown remains undecided: she is vegetarian and asks the waiter if the kitchen "can make up something". He immediately produces an extensive vegetarian menu and she whoops with delight. "Ooh, look at that, this changes everything." She cancels the broccoli in favour of a large mixed salad, and goes for vegetarian bubble and squeak as a main.

"My detractors say I'm so full of indecision and vagueness," Brown says.

"There are artists I love who make a complete and final statement but I can never be like them – figurative people: John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton. They say something once and they've said it; they seem so sure of what they're saying. The whole figurative abstract thing is about not wanting to name something, not pin it down. I've never wanted to let go of the figure, but it keeps wanting to disappear. It's always a fight to hold on. Like something to get hold of, I have something very specific in mind with each mark – a dog's snout, a building in the distance – that gives the paint a certain authority and direction, otherwise it's too woolly. But it's also about letting something move, slip away. I'm very open to accident."

He starts arrive and Brown obligingly eyes my egg. "Are we supposed to talk about the food? Look how orange that yolk is. And how the waiters here, they're very old-school. I did a lot of waitressing, and cleaning jobs: they're similar to painting in that you're on your own, on a roll, a rhythm. I still can't cook. I don't drive. I deliberately don't know how to do anything. When I had my daughter [Brown is married to architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff; they have one child, Celeste] my mums said: 'Welcome to the human race.' She meant it nicely: you're forced to be in the world more, you can be very isolated as an artist, you make up your own days."

Her mother is novelist Shena Mackay. At 21 Brown was told that her father was not Mackay's former husband Robin – the couple had divorced when Cecily was two – but a family friend, influential critic and curator David Sylvester. "I was very, very surprised, but at the same time it absolutely made sense: how could I not see it? It'll be like a TV drama. I goes on being complicated. David always said I was much nicer to him before I knew he was my dad."

Sylvester took her to galleries and introduced her to artists, including

Francis Bacon, but Brown had already decided to be an artist "at the age of three, though I went through a phase when I wanted to act". She grew up in Surrey, "a classic suburban kid who wanted to get away. David Bowie was my huge number-one hero as a teenager." A monumental canvas in the new show, "Lady Grinning Soul", pays homage. "I was madly in love with him and his beauty, the lyrics sound so great. Painting is closest to poetry of all the arts: not being able to explain something, why does one thing sound so great next to another? You can't put your finger on it, that's what my work's about."

Brown says she had always assumed she wouldn't have children. "This relationship [with her daughter] is different from all my others. I'd never had any responsibilities before, I had so much freedom, to not take holidays or weekends, to just be – a very selfish existence but important for an artist. Painting, more than any other art, you have to put in the hours. I don't want my daughter ever to feel she's competition with my work – even though she's. Deep down, I don't think painters should have a day off. I adore Auerbach, I'm reading his biography, and I was so jealous when he said he couldn't give one day off a year."

"I miss procrastination, sitting and looking at a painting for three hours a day, that doesn't happen now. The world is imposing so many distractions – but it's a less neurotic relationship with painting than it used to be. I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss the long hours; it's incredibly hard to put down tools. The two things [painting and motherhood] are really very far apart from one another, but in the 10-minute walk from the studio to home, I become mummy again. Why are there so few women artists? There's one reason: childcare! They can't afford it. I get so cross when I hear my male friends are painting on Saturday – because I'm not, and because it's not good for their kids that they're."

he mains appear. Brown says the bubble and squeak is "absolutely delicious, amazing," the sole is perfect. "I'm so lucky," Brown continues. "Despite the vileness of the market, I've benefited from it a lot. I can't complain. I can be proud that I am one of the few women – Marlene Dumas, Jenny Saville, Cindy Sherman, Lisa Yuskavage, Elizabeth Peyton – commanding high prices."

I wonder if these artists have anything in common. "Larry Gagosian" Brown jokes without missing a beat. (Gagosian represents Saville, Sherman and Peyton; Dumas and Yuskavage are with his global rival David Zwirner.) She adds quickly: "I love Larry, he raised the bar, no one can complain about his museum-quality shows around the world. I'm worried your fish is getting cold."

She orders another Bloody Mary. I join her with more champagne, and ask her why anyone paints today. "Let's face it, everything has been done. Colour is a way you can be different: lurid colours, things people say are hideous. There's the urge to prove that painting can still do things, that there are other ways to say things. It's harder each century to do

anything new. Painting has been hard since photography because there's no real reason to do it. Bacon said the hardest thing is knowing what to paint. If you don't have the physical urge, you can talk yourself out of it intellectually before you even pick up a brush. I don't think in any other way, I have to be in the studio, I don't have ideas unless I'm physically doing it."

Her sources used to be photographs, now "it's more other art." The Garden of Earthly Delights' has been on the floor of my studio for 10 years, and I'm only just making something from it, fairly obliquely. Bosch and Bruegel are my favourites. There are people you use and people you love – I love Titian but I've never worked from Titian; and ones you feel very close to – Delacroix; and others you admire from a distance but they're not like you – Barnett Newman, for instance. I could manage a copy of Delacroix. I'm about energy and movement."

Our plates are cleared. Brown turns down dessert. "I'm not a big pudding person but I don't want you to write that I was on a diet!" Guests are streaming into the hotel for afternoon tea, and she is keen to return to the gallery. "My favourite part is installing, moving things around, giving them space. It's not about individual paintings, it's about the relationship between them – don't tell the collectors!"

As we leave, I ask if she has a favourite among the new works. She names the

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most light-suffused canvas, filled with young bodies floating in and out of view.

"It has to be 'Madrepora'," she says with a rush of feeling. "When I first got to New York I kept reading the beginning of Proust. I was obsessed by it. In the back of my mind I often thought about painting the little girls on the beach. I recently reread after 20 years that passage that has informed me more than any other in literature. He's talking about looking, he captures the act of looking more than anything else I've ever read. He describes the inability to see something all at once, the desire to see something just out of your grasp, shape-shifting. He sees this group, he doesn't know which girl is which, one is taking the place of the next, changing into the next. It's about time and memory, the inability to capture something fully, the sense of loss implicit in remembering something and trying to get it down. The act of painting is the act of processing; you have to get to the dark room of the brain to be alone, the desire to paint is also the desire for solitude." And then she slips away, a glimpse of a figure merging into the straggles of Mayfair crowds.

Jackie Wullschlager is the FT's chief visual arts critic. "Madrepora" runs from today until July 25 at Thomas Dane Gallery



ON FT.com To view some of Jackie Wullschlager's favourite Cecily Brown paintings go to the online art-viewers this story at ft.com/art-viewers