

Deborah Brown
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Street Smarts

Can beautiful color and expressive brushwork redeem the commonplace? More specifically, can the painter's art imbue burnt-out urban insanity with the timeless tranquility of transcendent nature? The painter Deborah Brown explores that question and more with her new series, which pictures the common sidewalk market so familiar to New Yorkers, specifically those found along Broadway and Canal Street and further east on Grand Street in downtown Manhattan, oddly enough on the boundaries of the SoHo, Tribeca and Lower East Side art districts. These fleeting displays of goods constitute decidedly marginal markets of two distinct but closely related types: first, counterfeit luxury brand designer bags laid out right on the pavement, illegal in every sense but nevertheless tolerated, subject to police harassment and confiscation; and second, the sidewalk stalls and storefronts offering heaps of perishable comestibles, from fresh fish and seafood to exotic fruits, vegetables and medicinal herbs. What's more, these surreal scenes set on unhygienic city streets, in a cursed miasma of dirt, litter, smog, auto exhaust and the emanations of hordes of human bodies, have undeniable real-world appeal, not only because they thrum with life but also because the wares are all but irresistible to the everyday citizen, i.e., that statistic known as the U.S. consumer. These markets are a destination for rich and poor, suburbanite and East Sider. In short, they sell.

Nothing is more American, and like everything American is bought and sold as a multivalent sign. Hectic, harrowing, certainly marginal, the sidewalk market is reminiscent of Old New York, our proud Ellis Island diversity that here juxtaposes communities from China and Africa, two great continents halfway around the globe, aligned on New York concrete through the dynamics of the eternal petit bourgeoisie - and depicted by Brown's ingenious artistic vision. Chinatowns began in the U.S. some 175 years ago, and we're all familiar with their history and accomplishments, but the outlaw purveyors of bogus designer goods deserve special comment: tall, stern, regal immigrants in track suits, hailing from Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, they barter and bargain while ready to gather up their goods - apparently manufactured in China and shipped here - and nonchalantly abscond. They live the truth that some laws are designed to thwart ordinary consumer desire in order to protect corporate capital. Both these groups are nodes along an endless chain of economic transactions that reach across the oceans to who knows where. We don't need Karl Marx to tell us that commodities are anonymous and interchangeable, without history or individuality. It's a sidewalk *Kunstammer* of worldwide exchange, figures of capitalist diversity, an embarrassment of riches mixed with things that fell off the truck. As a subject for the contemporary class-conscious artist, it's cheap, fast, lowbrow - *Là-Bas*, to cite Joris-Karl Huysmans - glittering, motley, multiethnic, populist, disreputable, democratic. It has everything. For an artist, it's perfect.

So yes, color does transform the everyday. Blue, green, orange, purple, yellow - the plain names are insufficient when, in Brown's paintings, Chinatown storefronts glow primrose and cerise like a Western sunrise, skies stretch overhead in swaths of azure and emerald, and the cityscape rises in transparent hazel, coral and marigold with sidewalks underfoot like a wet

tourmaline rainbow. And the wares! For that is our central obsession here, things for sale, things to buy, gathered from around the globe and thrust right out in the thoroughfare so you can't help but engage with them. Under the artist's brush they flicker, glisten and glow like Ali Baba's treasure in the light of a thousand candles. On this I can't help but cite the Dauphin in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, whose praised steed is "the colour of nutmeg" with "the heat of the ginger" - an object of desire with all the power of a mighty steed. Artists, scientists and philosophers have long theorized the intricacies of chromatic harmonies, and Brown may well command these hidden mysteries, but as for me I adhere to the simple directive of the Ab-Ex painter Adja Yunkers in my college art studio elective: "Just use color!"

At the beginning of the 20th century color is the thing that makes painting modern, with Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck and the Fauves spinning out a pure "vertigo of color," as the title of the new Fauvism exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum has it. Along with the new century, pure color asserted intensity, strangeness, pleasure, but certainly not shopping - it took the Cubists to do that with the invention of collage. Suddenly, labels from liqueurs and scraps of newspapers placed the artist firmly in the cafe, not just as a flâneur but as a customer, a consumer. This aspect of modern life was a constant from the previous century, when Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) offered branded spirits we still recognize today. The Impressionists, notably James Tissot, are celebrated for scenes of shopping, and for shop girls - both then a novelty, part of yet another artistic revolution rooted in economic change. By the way, the artist who foregrounded shopping as part of his artistic practice, that is, Marcel Duchamp, that purveyor of bottle racks, snow shovels and porcelain conveniences, did so as part of an "anti-retinal" argument - no sensuous color for him, thank you - off-color puns instead. One could say he dealt then in resale as well as manufacture. Shopping as a subject for painters has an amusing reflexivity - think of Daumier's comic *The Print Collector* (1860), where the subject is not so much the selection of artworks as the obsessive avidity of the client. The shopper, the artist, the dealer, the customer, they mirror each other as we shall see. Note too that market scenes date to the early Renaissance and are invariably urban; one could say the primary purpose of a town is to provide a market. Temporary seasonal markets held in open spaces gradually gave way to permanent shops, a dynamic still active 500 years later, as seen in Brown's paintings.

Perhaps my favorite market paintings date to the 17th century Dutch Golden Age, when the mercantile Protestants of the Netherlands abandoned as subjects Catholic Bible stories and portraits of bloodline aristocrats in favor once again of scenes of daily life. The Dutch had their share of artistic innovations: the words "stilleven" and "landschap" were adopted into English as "still life" and "landscape." Frans Snyders' *The Fish Market* (1618-1621), one of a cycle of four such paintings, now in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, provides a telling antecedent: where the Snyders is a triumphant celebration of prosperity and the mastery of nature, Brown's paintings are more ambivalent, implicitly suggesting a degree of frantic alienation in contemporary commerce. Both her vendors and their customers are all but faceless, defined by their role in the shopping experience as much as by any implied inner life. The funny thing is that Dutch still lifes are often interpreted as morality tales, showing the folly of greed and pride. Brown's subjects too may have this ominous allegorical implication.

In America shopping is the prime directive - let's go to the mall - and though it vacillates between cheerful pastime and daily chore, it undeniably has therapeutic value. Art is thought to be good for you, and merchants like to argue that shopping is as well. Professional academic publications like *The Psychology of Marketing* and the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* report that "making purchases helps people feel instantly happier," arguably because shopping "confers a sense of personal control and autonomy" that is lost in today's regimented computerized economy. Stressed shoppers are described as experiencing a spark of joy with each new purchase, a boost of mood, however transitory, that is not unlike descriptions of the esthetic experience. Both are forms of immediate gratification. Yet shopping today is one of mean calculation as much as avid desire. The shopper, like the art collector, doesn't just want a deal, they want a steal. Whether status fetish or daily dinner, picking over the offerings, looking for the choicest fillet, judging the most authentic counterfeit, then haggling over price is all too familiar to denizens of the art world. Is the similarity a sign of infection, a symptom of illness, or is it a mere coincidence, idle wordplay?

Another important street scene, an icon of early modernism, is Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's eponymous *Street Scene, Berlin* (1913), now at the Museum of Modern Art. Done in clashing colors with jagged outlines, and proudly depicting two prostitutes and their potential clients (according to notes on the MoMA website), the painting was a symbol of "modernity and the metropolis." Kirchner said that he painted "instinctively and without premeditation," and thereby expressed his spiritual life as well as the inner life of his subjects. Many artists today believe that painting allows unique access to a peculiarly intimate kind of human meaning, and Brown is one of them. There's certainly something haunting about the counterfeit that everyone wants, about the microeconomies thriving in a world of billionaires and huge flows of capital, in the way paintings reward looking, and the visually dazzling cornucopia of things hidden in plain sight.

—Walter Robinson, New York, Oct. 8, 2023

WALTER ROBINSON is a New York painter and art critic. He exhibits his work with Air de Paris in Paris, Galerie Sébastien Bertrand in Geneva, and Jeffrey Deitch in New York and Los Angeles. Robinson was founding editor of Art-Rite (1973–1977) and Artnet Magazine (1996–2012), and has written on art for Art in America, Artspace.com, the East Village Eye, and The Observer.