

"From Playful, Busy Self-Portraits To Mundane Still Lives, Deborah Brown Explores Our Collective Isolation," by Natasha Gural for Forbes, January 21, 2021.

Forbes

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Deborah Brown 'Bathtub Self Portrait with Zeus' (2020) Oil on canvas 48 inches x 48 inches IMAGE COURTESY DEBORAH BROWN AND ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

Deborah Brown was organizing a group show with fellow artist Patty Horing scheduled to open in the summer of 2020 when the deadly pandemic forced New Yorkers into quarantine.

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"By mid-March (2020) as everything was grinding to a halt, I was struck by the opportunity this afforded me to paint a self-portrait that reflected the profound isolation and fear we all were all experiencing," said Brown.

Looking at a small portrait she created of her holding her late dog, a Jack Russell Terrier named Zeus, Brown found new inspiration.

"It seemed a sincere response to the loneliness and loss we were collectively experiencing. This painting was the gateway to the work that I have been doing since," said Brown.

From that intense exploration of loss and solitude emerged a joyful portrait of Brown soaking in a clawfoot tub, surrounded by lush green plants, as Zeus delights her by grasping the rim to stand on his hind paws and face the viewer.

Bathtub Self Portrait with Zeus (2020), a 48-inch square oil on canvas is a highlight of *Things As They Are*, Brown's solo show at Anna Zorina Gallery in New York on view through February 13.

Born in Pasadena, California, in 1955, Brown who lives and works in Brooklyn, has shown her work at 25 solo exhibitions since 1986 as well as group shows and public installations.

The current exhibition features work Brown created during the COVID-19 pandemic, when she shifted her focus to self-portraits and still lifes celebrating her playful painterly style to convey everyday narratives with passion and emotion.

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Deborah Brown 'Melancholia' (2020) Oil on canvas 88 inches x 77 inches IMAGE COURTESY DEBORAH BROWN AND ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

Things As They Are borrows its title from the 1937 Wallace Stevens poem *The Man with The Blue Guitar*, divided into thirty-three lengthy sections, or cantos, of between four and sixteen couplets, which enable him to alter perspectives and devise abstract realities. Like Stevens, Brown examines the complex interrelationship between life and art.

"As the series progressed, I began to enlarge the scope and the scale of the self-portraits to include furniture in my domestic surroundings and eventually the objects in it," said Brown. "I depicted myself in my favorite chair in the company of my animal companions, my dogs and parakeets. Then I narrowed my gaze to

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depict just the still life objects: jewelry, figurines, dishware, pillboxes, shells, and other things I had collected over the years."

Many of the objects are from her childhood or inherited from her mother.

"I see my activity as a kind of psychoanalysis rather than a fetishization of my surroundings. By delving into the particulars of my environment, I hope to uncover truths about my own experience that I hope will speak to others," said Brown. "Like (Sigmund) Freud, I believe in the unconscious. We access it through the things around us. Think of Proust and his madeleine (traditional small cake), whose infusion in a cup of tea evoked for him his childhood in Combray."

While Brown's work is introspective, the intricate and imaginative images stand on their own while inviting an inner dialogue.

While works like *Melancholia* overtly illustrate the subject's mood and dynamic in one's immediate surroundings, the simplicity of *Self-Portrait in a Teapot* demonstrates the power of a single object and how it can contain myriad emotions and connections to various facets of our existence and persona.

"We also access our innermost thoughts through the things we create: dreams, art, literature, music, relationships. Photos of Freud's consultation room reveal that he owned a group of archaic figurines that he displayed on a shelf while he excavated the unconscious of his patients," Brown said.

At age 30, the Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis began collecting art objects from around the world, primarily Greece, Rome, and China. Freud had a special association with each piece, amassing more than 2,000 objects, including an array of small statuary. He fretted that the Nazis wouldn't let him take his treasures when he emigrated to England, but he continued building his collection for some four decades.

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Deborah Brown 'Self-Portrait in a Teapot' (2020) Oil
on Masonite 24 inches x 18 inches IMAGE COURTESY
DEBORAH BROWN AND ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

“We surround ourselves with things that affirm us, intrigue us and reveal ourselves to ourselves. Art is no different. It offers a mirror and a window into our experience and feelings. We do not have to share a history or familiarity with an artist’s subject matter in order to experience his/her/their truth. To be most effective, art must be both specific and universal.”

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Deborah Brown 'Doorstep' (2020) Oil on canvas 60 inches x 48 inches IMAGE COURTESY
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