Fredrick Brown: The Jazz Paintings

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FREDERICK BROWN: The Jazz Paintings
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Music controls the rhythm of my work...Sound has lots of colors in it. Frederick Brown, 1990

In addition to featuring a selection of recently completed paintings of jazz performers, Frederick Brown: The Jazz Paintings offers a broad cross section of the work of one of the most eclectic and aesthetically diverse African-American painters working today.

Born in Greensboro, Georgia in 1945 and reared in a working class neighborhood in Chicago, Frederick Brown graduated with a degree in painting from the University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale in 1968 and two years later, moved to New York, where he became intimately involved with a community of jazz musicians that included Ornette Coleman and Anthony Braxton. In 1975, Brown met Willem de Kooning, one of this century's great painters, who inspired him to devote himself completely to painting not simply as a career, but as a sacred calling.

Brown's first solo show in New York was at the Noah Goldowsky Gallery in 1975 and by the 1980s, he was exhibiting at the Marlborough Gallery in New York. By the late 1970s, Brown's painting had begun to move away from the large and colorful de Kooning-inspired abstractions to more representational painting, although he maintains that his work continues to be "abstract" in one way or another. In 1988, Brown staged a retrospective exhibition, consisting of over 100 paintings, at the National Museum of the Chinese Revolution in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China, the first exhibition of a Western artist in a national museum in China.

Since the 1980s, Brown's work has been in high demand and he has fulfilled many commissions, from cover illustrations of The New Yorker to public monuments, such as his colossal 33’x28’ The Assumption of Mary at the Xavier College Library in New Orleans.

In 1994 Brown completed The History of Art, now on permanent display at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City. Consisting of 110 paintings on seven walls, this impressive installation offers a visual document of the history of art through Brown's unique perspective.

The four jazz paintings represented in this exhibition are to be part of Brown's most ambitious project to date: a 300-panel mural consisting of portraits of the famous and lesser-known performers who have made important contributions to the development of jazz music, an artform that has contributed significantly to American culture. These paintings, which include portraits of Dinah Washington, Ben Webster, and Bud Powell, as well as a striking nude portrait of Josephine Baker, are unique and creative interpretations of their subjects' physical characteristics, which Brown is extremely adept at accomplishing and which puts him firmly within the vital Western tradition of caricature. Moreover they also represent Brown's attempt to access their spiritual qualities.

I'm not painting from life--since most of them are dead, I'm working from photographs--and I need something to fill in the outline, I feel like I'm creating a painted body for the spirit to inhabit it. I'm trying to get a feeling rather than just a likeness. It is this "feeling," as Brown calls it, that exudes from these recent paintings as they capture the "spirit" of the performers. What gives these paintings this spiritual quality is the expressionist style in which they are painted. Whether in the German Expressionist style of Max Beckmann or the American Abstract Expressionist style of Willem de Kooning, expressionism holds sacred the spontaneous brush stroke as the most immediate vehicle for aesthetic communication. And Brown owes much to the New York School painters Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. In a conversation with Lowery Sims, Associate Curator of 20th-Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brown says:

I was always in love with Abstract Expressionism, and de Kooning was influential on me and my career. To me, Abstract Expressionism was a very beautiful, lyrical language, like spoken Italian. Also, I had always been fascinated with that type of surface, because my mother was a baker, and I used to like to watch her frost cakes and things.

Brown's explanation reveals both sides of his aesthetic personality: a highly sophisticated understanding of the history of art on the one hand that is combined with a highly personal and unorthodox interpretation of the artistic traditions and cultures and how they intersect with his own aesthetic experience on the other. However, Brown's version of expressionism does not suggest Beckmann's existential anxiety nor does it reflect de Kooning's stylistic ambiguity. It is an aesthetic language that Brown utilizes in order to suggest or communicate his emotions as well as the spiritual essence of his subjects.

But as spontaneous and "improvisational" as his paintings appear to be, they are the product of much serious research and study. All of Brown's major commissions, from his Xavier College painting to his mural at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and all of his portraits, including the blues paintings, Native American series, and recent jazz paintings require considerable research. And ironically, this is how Brown's expressionism is most closely aligned with the German Expressionists and Abstract Expressionists: his paintings are the results of a personal and highly individualistic struggle to come to grips with history, whether that is the history of art, of blues and jazz, of the Native and African-Americans, of religion, or even of his own development as an artist.

And like many of the European Expressionists, such as Beckmann and Kandinsky, who studied Medieval and Byzantine art because they believed them to be ideal manifestations of the spirituality inherent in art, Brown sees his own expressionism as a search for spirituality. And it is this obsessive quest for the spiritual, whether that is in the Old Masters, music, Native American or African American culture, or in folk religion, that functions as the unifying leitmotif for Brown's oeuvre. It is therefore within the context of this desire for the spiritual that has shaped Brown's aesthetic development that his recent jazz paintings must be understood. Each of the four series of subjects represented in this exhibition, blues, Native Americans, clowns, and jazz groups emerge out of, and take shape from, Brown's unique personal experiences. Therefore, Brown's art reflects a return to subject matter that is characteristic of much contemporary art since the early 1980s, which can be described as "post-abstract figuration."

On a trip in 1988 to the Mississippi Delta with a friend to research a planned documentary on blues singers, Brown encountered the culture in an entirely new way. The blues paintings are the aesthetic products of this powerful experience. They were first exhibited at the Marlborough Gallery in 1989 and were, according to Brown's statement that accompanied the show, dedicated "to
Bud Powell, 1996, oil on linen, Courtesy of the Artist
Photo Credit: John Spence
the Bluesmen and women of the world and to the building of the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, Mississippi." Brown grew up in Chicago listening to the blues as he worked, like his grandfather and stepfather, in the mills. And he met blues musicians Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Lightnin' Hopkins, who had a profound effect not only on his love of blues, but on his commitment to artistic expression, in whatever medium and at whatever cost. In that statement at the Marlborough show, Brown asserts that his blues paintings represent an attempt "to see that their songs and images, would be preserved with dignity and in a historical perspective." Paintings such as Clifton Chenier, 1989, express Brown's intensely personal commitment to, and experience of, blues music.

Brown's images of Native American subjects arose from his encounter with Native American culture while doing research on indigenous folk art traditions and their stress on their image's capacity to communicate, express, and embody spirituality. Paintings such as Black Elk Speaks, 1992, not only reveal the personality of the famous Native Americans represented, but are results of Brown's unique interpretation of the Native American process of making visual images as a means to serve a higher religious end. As Brown remarked in 1995, "art is a religious experience--it's not coming from you, it's coming through you." And moreover, Brown has been attracted to the unique role of the image-maker within Native American culture as a spiritual leader. "When you are really painting, in the truest sense, it is sort of a shamanistic, magical act." 6

Perhaps the most enigmatic of the series Brown has produced are his so-called clown paintings. Brown is certainly aware of the rich tradition in modern art of painting clowns and harlequins. The late 19th-century Symbolist painters, including the early Picasso, identified clowns and harlequins, along with gypsies and other wandering itinerants, as metaphors for the "outsider" artist. In addition, these artists saw the circus as symbolic of life itself, with its tragic and comic elements.

But for Brown these clown paintings emerge primarily from another intensely private and personal experience. Brown says that these clown paintings, such as Cody, 1990 and Abe Johnson, 1990, arose not from a calculated art historical decision, but from the experience he had while visiting his daughter when she was in the hospital in New York. He was struck with the drabness of the institutional decor and the result was a series of clown paintings that, despite their haunting appearance, were intended to make his daughter smile, "I just tried to think about what would make sick children laugh." 6

And finally, his portraits of jazz performers are the most recent manifestation of Brown's desire to preserve, document, and access the rich history of jazz music which, like that of the blues, has had a profound impact on his life as well as on the cultural lives of millions of Americans. When Brown moved to New York in 1970 as a young man, he was welcomed into a community of artists, primarily jazz musicians, which according to Brown, marked a turning point in his life as he embarked on the development of theories combining visual art and music with Ornette Coleman and Anthony Braxton and producing a number of multi-media efforts. And in fact, Brown credits jazz with saving his life--literally. While in New York, Brown became seriously ill and required surgery. However, he could not afford the procedure and it was only through the efforts of Coleman and others who offered to pay the hospital bill (unknown to Brown until many years later) that he received the medical treatment he desperately needed. As a result of such a close relationship with the men and women who made the music and impacted his life, these portraits reflect, above all, the humanity of the performers. For Brown, jazz is more than just music, it is ultimately about his affection for the musicians who created it and their influence on him as an artist. These jazz portraits then, like the other portraits included in this exhibition, are double portraits.

They are not only about the expression of the personality of the historical figures, but also--and in fact--ultimately, they are about Brown himself--his personal relationship with the traditions, cultures, and people that have sustained and nourished him not only as an artist but as a human being.

Daniel A. Siedell, Curator

Born in Greensboro, Georgia in 1945 and reared in Chicago, Frederick Brown received a BA in painting from the University of Southern Illinois-Carbondale in 1968. He has had numerous solo exhibitions at the Marlborough Gallery in New York and has been honored with retrospective exhibitions in Beijing, China, and at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, DC. His paintings are in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Museum of American Art, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, and the White House.

Cody, 1990, oil on linen, Collection of Pearson Art Foundation. Photo Credit: Zindman/Fremont

1 Quoted in John Howell, "Painting the Blues," Elle Decor (August 1990), 27.
2 Ibid.
4 Quoted in Liz Rolfsmeier, "Spirituality key to artist's work...a new dimension," Discover (August 10, 1995).
5 Ibid.
6 "Painting the Blues," 28.
Dinah Washington, 1996, oil on linen, Courtesy of the Artist
Photo Credit: John Spence
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Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one-person exhibitions of art by nationally recognized contemporary artists.

On the cover:
Ben Webster, 1996, oil on linen, Courtesy of the Artist
Photo Credit: John Spence

Clifton Chenier, 1989, oil on linen, Collection of Pearson Art Foundation.
Photo Credit: Zindman/Fremont

Abe Johnson, 1990, oil on linen, Collection of Pearson Art Foundation.
Photo Credit: Zindman/Fremont

Magic Sam, 1992, oil on linen, Collection of Pearson Art Foundation.
Photo Credit: Zindman/Fremont