

[Brown at Saatchi Gallery](#)[Brown at the Gagosian Gallery](#)[Brown at Thomas Dane Gallery](#)

“I’ve always thought of myself as a figurative painter,” Brown [reflected in a video interview](#) from her New York studio in 2014. “There’s always been a strong element of abstraction, but it’s something that happens very naturally...I’m far more interested in the moment where figuration breaks down...if I don’t have some figural idea, I get completely lost.”

The National Gallery of Art in D.C. hosted Brown for [a conversation about her sources of inspiration](#) in 2016, including Fragonard, Goya, and Bruegel. “I was always really obsessed with art of the past. I never really understood why anyone wouldn’t be...I just felt a really close relationship with art from a hundred years ago. I never felt any distance from it,” Brown explained. “When you’re feeling lost, you can go back to these sources.”

Drawing and painted studies are a central part of Brown’s practice. [The Drawing Center](#) in New York hosted the first museum exhibition dedication to her works on paper in 2016. The Whitworth, at the University of Manchester, followed in 2018 with [drawings of shipwrecks](#) inspired by Gericault and Delacroix. An intimate portrait in photographs by [W Magazine](#) showcased Brown her studio as she worked through these studies.

[Apollo Magazine](#) interviewed Brown as she prepared for her 2018 exhibition at the [Louisiana Museum of Modern Art](#) in Denmark. “Seeing a group of works together in a show is like the final part of the whole process of making paintings: seeing how they relate, what story they tell, and what they mean once they’re in the world,” Brown explained. “The excitement of doing a show like this is that I get to see what I’ve been doing for the past 20 years.”



Brown, 2016
Photograph: Mark Hartman/W Magazine

“I never think of painting as a cathartic thing, but I definitely think it’s a way of processing things...the way I see the world is fragmented. Recently I’ve been thinking of it more like shattered, everything is splintered,” Brown explained in a [video profile](#) for the 2018 Louisiana Museum exhibition, *Where, When, How Often and with Whom*. Brown discussed [the triptych](#), made in 2017 and partially inspired by real world events, for which the show was titled.

Brown spoke at the [Kunsthistorisches Museum](#) in Vienna in 2018 about her love of Rubens and the influence of Old Masters paintings in her work. “I love artifice, I love fakery in art. I like it to be big, and larger than life, and clearly made up. I love how much of Rubens is taken from other places...the fleshiness and the movement are the things I keep going back to, and the color.”

The New York Times [profiled Brown](#) as she installed two monumental paintings in the main hall of [The Metropolitan Opera](#) in 2018 – the first time an artist received such an invitation since Marc Chagall in 1966.

[The Blenheim Art Foundation](#) in Britain presented an exhibition of new work in 2020, [created in response to the Palace’s history](#) as a country hunting estate and collection of paintings, tapestries, armor, and decorative art.



Brown, 2019
Photograph: David Oates

Cecily Brown (British, b. 1969)
Focus Object, 2024
 Oil on linen

Private Collection; L2024:79.1

Born and raised in London, Cecily Brown found her love of art history when she accompanied her father, an art critic, to a Francis Bacon exhibition at the age of sixteen. She later trained as a painter, breaking from her generation’s “shock tactics” approach to explore the boundaries between figuration and abstraction with loose, gestural brushstrokes. **Focus Object** takes inspiration from Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés* (1946-1966) to depict a scene of a woman in labor. However, Brown subverts the male gaze implied in Duchamp’s perplexing and shocking installation by depicting a delicate female face, instead of genitalia, as her figure experiences the physical and spiritual process of childbirth.



Marcel Duchamp
Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage
 (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas),
 1946-1966
 Assemblage
 Philadelphia Museum of Art

On view December 11, 2024 – March 16, 2025



Cecily Brown (British, b. 1969)
The Englischer Garten, 2018-2021
Oil on linen

Private Collection; L2022:130.1

Cecily Brown left London for New York in the 1990s to pursue her painting practice apart from the Young British Artists (YBAs) of her generation. Her dynamic works blur figuration and abstraction, often using vivid colors and gestural brushstrokes. Brown is also deeply interested in the history of art and directly engages with compositions, themes, and imagery from the Western canon. **The Englischer Garten**, a large, public garden in Munich, Germany, references the long history of erotic figures in public garden settings – from Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1500) to Édouard Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863). Gardens have also been a prominent theme throughout Brown’s work. The artist once said: “There’s something about going into the studio and painting that’s very similar to playing in the garden by yourself as a child—particularly if it’s a walled garden or a secret garden. You go into this other world, which is fully absorbing.”

On view March 15 – June 18, 2023



Hieronymus Bosch
The Garden of Earthly Delights (detail), 1490-1500
Oil on oak panel
Museo del Prado, Madrid



Édouard Manet
Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe (*Luncheon on the Grass*), 1863
Oil on canvas
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Cecily Brown (British, b. 1969)

Escalier, 2021-2022

Oil on linen

Private Collection; L2022:141.1

“You can see things more clearly when they are small.” Cecily Brown is known for her dynamic, expressive paintings that toe the line between figuration and abstraction. Trained at London’s Slade School of Art alongside the emerging group of Young British Artists, Brown rose to prominence as a figurative painter after moving to New York City in 1994. In recent years, Brown has created some of the largest works of her career. **Escalier** (“Staircase”) marks her return to a smaller, more intimate scale that encourages slow looking and attention to detail. Like other works in Brown’s oeuvre that reference art historical imagery, this painting also alludes to Marcel Duchamp’s (1887-1968) *Nu descendant un escalier n°2* (*Nude descending a staircase No. 2*), a pivotal painting in the history of abstraction.



Marcel Duchamp

Nu descendant un escalier n°2 (*Nude descending a staircase*

No. 2, 1912

Oil on canvas

Philadelphia Museum of Art



On view February 8 – May 14, 2023



Cecily Brown (British, b. 1969)
Luncheon on the Grass, 2021-2022
Oil on linen

Private Collection; L2022:16.1

Born and raised in England, Cecily Brown moved to New York City in 1994. Though she emerged at the same time as the Young British Artists in the 1990s, Brown did not share the group's shock tactics approach and turned instead to expressionistic painting. Brown's dynamic works are known for their vivid colors and active movement; her paintings blur figuration and abstraction and often reference imagery from Western art history. **Luncheon on the Grass** was commissioned for a 2022 exhibition at Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles. The exhibition invited contemporary painters to respond to Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*), which shocked visitors to the 1863 Salon des Refusés in Paris and is traditionally studied as one of the first "modern" paintings. Brown interpreted the scene three times for the Jeffrey Deitch exhibition in various levels of abstraction. This **Luncheon on the Grass** is the most abstracted version, with the stark contrast between nude and clothed figures alone maintaining the reference to Manet's iconic composition.



Édouard Manet
Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe (*Luncheon on the Grass*), 1863
Oil on canvas
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

On view May 18 – August 21, 2022

Cecily Brown (British, b. 1969)

Selfie, 2020

Oil on linen

From the collection of Alliance Talent c/o of Jason Swartz; L2020:120.1

Contemporary life and politics resonate with history in Cecily Brown's new work, inspired, as she explained, by "a nation in turmoil." The nation is the United Kingdom, the artist's place of birth, and she worries that it is increasingly paralyzed by fantasies of the past. Brown's inspiration for this work included the historical suite of tapestries and paintings at Blenheim Palace, a ducal country home in Woodstock that earned its fame as the seat of twelve generations of the Dukes of Marlborough and the birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill. Paintings constituting a veritable canon of sixteenth- through nineteenth-century European and British art history adorn its walls. With an uncharacteristically legible composition (compared to Brown's other work), the sardonically titled **Selfie** riffs on the tradition of the artistic Salon. Initiated by Royal Academies in Europe during the seventeenth century, Salons displayed new paintings, filling a given space from floor to ceiling, for the praise and critique of elite patrons. Brown seems to be suggesting that today's digital galleries of celebrity social media selfies and comment sections evoke—in spirit, if not in form—the Salons of past centuries.

On view May 12 – August 15, 2021

Extra Resources

[Exhibition at Blenheim Palace](#)





Cecily Brown (British, b. 1969)
The Demon Menagerie, 2019-20
Oil on linen

Private Collection; L2020:116.1

Cecily Brown's vivid fusions of abstraction and figuration, chaos and stillness, fantasy and reality, nature and flesh are forged from a deep love of painting as a medium and art history as a catalyst for inspiration. Beginning in 2019, she returned to her love of Renaissance masters to execute a series of grand-scale contemporary commentaries on the palettes, genres, and themes explored in seventeenth century works. With its evocative title, **The Demon Menagerie** takes on a motif known as "concerts of birds," popularized by Flemish painter Frans Snyders (1579-1657), which depict an array of



Snyders, *Birds Concert*, ca. 1630-40
oil on canvas

different avian species perched on a series of trees. In contrast to the whimsical biological focus and legible natural environment of its precedent, Brown's menagerie emanates a quality of foreboding and turmoil as a melee of distinguishable trees and fleshly forms seem to disperse, merge, and shift in sinewy swirls of brushwork—a vision dancing on the edge of perception.

On view January 20 – April 25, 2021



Cecily Brown
Sentimental Fool, 2004
Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:88.7

Cecily Brown's adoration of art history began when she accompanied her father, an art critic, to a Francis Bacon exhibition at the age of sixteen. As a student at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in the early 1990s, she supplemented her coursework with frequent trips to The National Gallery, amassing lessons from Rubens, Titian, and Caravaggio, Francisco de Goya, and Hieronymus Bosch. Brown was an anomaly among her peers, dedicated to the medium of painting and the inclusion of human presence without relinquishing gestural abstraction. Always beginning with a concrete image in mind, Brown paints in an effort to capture the scene without "describing" it. The markedly figural **Sentimental Fool** reveals the traces of eroticism threaded through Brown's early paintings, in which her love for the fleshy bodies of Old Masters are evident. Echoes of classical Venuses, Odalisques, and Olympias seep through her hazy rendition of a reclining nude, which refuses to obey canonical stipulations of smooth flesh, delicate features, and a serene setting.

On view December 23, 2020 – March 28, 2021

Cecily Brown
As Like as Like Can Be, 2014
Oil on canvas

Private Collection, Los Angeles; L2020:102.1

“There are passages that are really fast and passages that are really slow and I’ve always liked the idea that there are different tempos within a painting, like a piece of music... My whole thing is that there is not one mood to a painting but that they are multi-layered in how the paint is applied, and also in layers of meaning and layers of mood. So there is never one thing going on. It’s full of contradictions.”

For London born, New York-based artist Cecily Brown, each finished canvas is a visual and physical expression of her dedication to the medium of painting. Brown is frequently aligned with the post-war American movement of Abstract Expressionism, touted as “fifth generation” in relation to first-generation New York School artists such as Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and Mark Rothko (all currently or recently on view at the JSMA). Brown resists such labels and categorization, however, preferring to conceive of herself as a “post-post-modern” artist looking back on the whole of art history as a potential library of influence. The figure also remains a central and resolute focus of her work, inspired by events and daily life observed through her own eyes or a camera lens, reproduced photographs, and Old Master paintings. Figures reveal themselves throughout Brown’s work in fluctuating but unmistakable bodily forms and frenetic brushstrokes of flesh-toned paint. With only a playfully obscure title as a guide, the chaotic maelstrom of color in paintings such as **As Like as Like Can Be** rewards patient consideration and an open receptivity toward the artist’s affection for contradictions.



On view November 25, 2020 – February 28, 2021



Cecily Brown (British, b.1969)
Thrice Happy Green, 2019-20
Oil on linen

Private Collection; L2020:40.1

Cecily Brown studied at London's Slade School of Art among a generation of artists loosely affiliated under the moniker "YBA" (Young British Artists). She quickly rose to prominence after moving in 1994 to New York, where her large-scale canvases garnered critical and commercial success. Like many of her peers working in a time of postmodern attitudes toward art and its history, Brown grapples with essential questions concerning the historical significance, contemporary value, and potential future of painting as an artistic medium. Yet Brown also believes painting has a superior capacity to hold and collect layers of meaning over time: in the long-term, through the decades, but also in the short term, in the present moment of visual encounter. As Brown explains, "one of painting's great strengths is that it can unfold slowly" and can therefore "force people to really look at things." Her work rewards such prolonged viewing. Rendered in her emotive, frenetic brushwork, **Thrice Happy Green** suggests a world in continual flux, revealed haphazardly in restless and elusive activity. Clarity remains just beyond reach, reflecting Brown's expressed interest in "where the mind goes when it's trying to make up for what isn't there."

On view June 17 – September 20, 2020