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Colleen Browning

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Gifted Woman Artist Rises To Fame In The 1950s Among NYC “Mad Men”

By Philip Eliasoph, Senior Arts Editor



(LEFT TO RIGHT) Self Portrait of Colleen Browning. At work in her studio. Preparing studio set designs for J. Arthur Rank Organisation, Spring 1949.



COLLEEN BROWNING

She “paints in a neat white blouse and tweed skirt and stockings,” noted *Glamour Magazine* in a 1954 splash feature about classically trained artist Colleen Browning. Just a bit ahead of the feminist vanguard of the next generation of female artists, the ravishingly attractive Browning cut a paradoxical swath across the tumultuous landscape of American art. Now, taking stock of her impact after six decades looking back through the rear-view mirror, Browning’s paintings are re-sur-facing for a fresh, second look.

A revisionist take on Browning’s ‘Magic Realist’ art at the zenith of her success in the 1950s-60s is as relevant as rewatching some recent episodes of television’s *Mad Men*. In that Emmy winning dramatic series, we can sense the artists’ struggle amidst the wars of professional identities, sexual politics, and stum and drang of slickly marketed products sudden rise and fall.

What seemed to be hopelessly banal like early advertising campaigns for Bristol-Creme or Buicks, has taken on a new post-modernist aura. Art world trends have seemingly shifted so dramatically that the April *ARTnews* cover story openly wondered: “When Bad is Good?” And by what criteria or standards of taste do artists gain market share or fall off the shelf?

Browning was an ‘old fashioned’ representational, realist artist. You know, those charmingly anecdotal paintings with or-

inary human beings captured in beguiling, existential vignettes. Since what the critics call ‘the Triumph of the New York School’ – modernist abstraction – realist art was decidedly outré. The cultural zeitgeist of the Eisenhower era of innocence was being overtaken with the brooding pessimism of Cold War era abstraction and avant-gardism.

Under the threat of a mushroom cloud, Mark Rothko’s pre-suicidal reams of dark-maroon-fade-to-black canvases perfectly captured the mood. Post-Hiroshima depression was in. Realist imagery capturing quotidian mini-dramas of pleasant town and country life was despised. Abstract master Barnett Newman announced in 1957 that it would be “1,000 years before we will see representational painting return.”

Norman Rockwell-esque pleasantries – paintings which the Common Man could actually relate to or infer some morsel of meaning, were hopelessly passé. Unapologetic elitists like *Harper’s* Editor Russell Lynees towed the line authoring missives on “Snobs,” “The Lastmakers,” and “High Brow, Middle Brow, Low Brow.” Conspiracy nationalism, regionalist views of town and country folk was suspect being too closely allied with mindless Stalinist Socialist Realism or even Nazi era propaganda. Lynees pronounced: “Any real New Yorker is a ‘you-name-it-we-have-it’ whose heart brims with sympathy for the millions



of unfortunate who through...pure STUPIDITY live, anywhere else in the world." Who thought Red state vs. Blue state cultural politics was something current?

Emerging out of obscurity, the enigmatic persona of Colleen Browning [1918-2003] is enjoying a current revival. As I have dedicated my own career to the revival of realist artists from the "lost generation of the mid-20th century, I have authored books and catalogs about artists including Paul Cadmus [Weston, CT], Robert Vicky [Fairfield, CT] and Stevan Dohanos [Westport, CT] taking on Colleen Browning's elusive career was right in my sweet spot.

With the encouragement and support of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art in Loretto, PA, I spent over three years excavating the artifacts of Browning's mysterious past. The result is: *Colleen Browning: The Enchantment of Realism*, [Hudson Hills Press, 2011]. Sparked by a national retrospective tour organized by SAMA's gallant efforts to organize a national tour, we have re-awakened attention and curiosity by collectors and curators, re-positioning her art back into the limelight.

Offering massive visual testimony of her prolific artistic vision, the exhibition will then tour museums at Fairfield University, Connecticut, the Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio, and the Amarillo Museum of Art, Texas through 2014. Her artistic legacy and archives were bequeathed by her late husband, Dr. Geoffrey Wagner to SAMA. The small, western Pennsylvania museum has worked tirelessly to honor Browning who enjoyed a popular retrospective there towards the end of her working career in 1999. And they seem to have struck gold.

Senior American art expert, Dr. Henry Adams, Professor at Case Western comments: "This book is something one never encounters: art history for grown-ups – it's got the complexity of real life or of a good novel. Through this scarily honest account, Eliaoph makes an utterly persuasive case of her accom-



(OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE) *Re Bamba Restaurant, Murat Study 1*, 1950, Watercolor, gouache and graphite on paper, 8 1/2 x 9 3/8 inches, Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner, Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art [2011.051]. *Nine Times One* [Self Portrait], 1970, Oil on canvas, 25 x 19 inches, Gift of the artist, Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art [99.127]. *Wet*, 1971, Oil on canvas, 35 x 46 1/2 inches, Gift of the artist, Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art [99.135].

(THIS PAGE) *WOW Car*, 1977, Oil on canvas, 36 x 54 inches, Gift of the artist, Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art [99.154].

er eye for vivid detail." *Newsweek* chimed in that Browning is "a painter with sharp eyes and a facile brush." She had arrived.

By 1965, John Canaday, *New York Time's* Chief Art Critic, raved about her latest gallery showing claiming she possessed awesome painterly abilities – comparing her to Hudson River School masters and Andrew Wyeth – that she "has the technical skill to do whatever she wants, in whatever way." However, as modernist style wars progressed from precisionist realism to muscular, wallpaper brush applied Abstract Expressionist angelic rendering technique was replaced with gutsy, bladder relieving angst.

Browning peaked just at the moment when the barometric pressure for realist art plummeted and the art world's weather vane swung around 180 degrees in anticipation of a Bermuda hurricane. By the 1970s her early rising star was fading. By the time of her tortured death in 2003 from intestinal cancer, her super nova had gone dark. She won numerous prestigious awards, was featured in many of the leading competitive national exhibits including the Whitney Museum's Annual and the Carnegie International Exhibition, and sold her works at top-notch New York venues including 57th Street's Kennedy Galleries. Virtually forgotten, she was rescued by the courageous intervention of Naples, Florida gallerist, Bill Meek of the Harmon-Meek Galleries, who literally salvaged her works from total obscurity.

Unable to pigeon-hole her, *Glennan Magazine's* clueless correspondent has difficulty assigning her marital and domestic duties with a self-invented, autonomous art career. The oppressively macho nature of American painting at mid-century – characterized by the stormy intellectual and boozed-up aestheticism of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and their circle – also contributes to this muddled narrative.

Like the bruised, childish egos of Don Draper and his over-sexualized partners in their glass skyscraper offices in *Mad Men*, the truly original work of their female underlings, Peggy, Joan and even lovely Megan, were never fully esteemed. Browning's undeniable contribution to American painting might have suffered as she was consistently being reduced to a housewife who painted as a hobby. A chatty interview with Browning published in 1949 in *The Rochester Democrat Chronicle*, was titled: "And She Can Cook Too." One wonders how many female artists of that generation were hand-capped by accepted attitudes. One prime-time TV show hit, *Father Knows Best* had actor

Robert Young speaking to his perky wife Jane Wyatt demanding, "C'mon woman, let's get on with the cooking."

A head-turning, dogpoo-ganger for Ingrid Bergman, *Glennan Magazine* described her as a "young housewife with a career of her own as an artist. Even her marketing trips Manhattan's Upper East Side [then Italian East Harlem] serve her paintings. Laden like a Sicilian donkey with shopping bags in either hand... the dark-haired, outright handsome young woman suddenly stops, props her burdens on the ground against her knee, and begins making surreptitious scratches on a piece of paper cupped in her hand."

Sensing the sweet taste of early fame and the indignities of later anonymity, Browning penned a personal handwritten note to feminist author Germaine Greer. Writing in 1987 – long after Browning had disappeared off the art world's radar screen – the artist lamented to the feminist icon: "Your diligence and scholarship in bringing to light these obliterated women [artists] is remarkable and I think a splendid incentive to women now; when conditions are easier, to treat themselves seriously."

Unquestionably, with this remarkable exhibition and definitive monographic book, another small story comes to light of how a woman's artistic genius now demands to be taken seriously. Colleen Browning is back in town. She's been liberated from the back-burner of a sometimes snobbish art world and pulled out of the kitchen. Now, nobody's going to wonder "what happened to that British import who stormed the New York art world but got lost in the shuffle?" □

Thursday, January 24, 2013

Exhibition Opening Receptions: The Bellarmine Museum of Art, 5:00-7:00 p.m., Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery, Quick Center for the Arts, 6:00-8:00 p.m.

Thursday, January 31, 2013

Lecture: with Philip Eliaoph, Ph.D., Professor of Art History, Fairfield University and author of *Colleen Browning: The Enchantment of Realism* with reception to follow, Diffley Board Room, Bellarmine Hall, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.

Saturday, February 9, 2013, 1:00-4:00 p.m.

Family Day: *Street Life* (best for ages four and up), The Bellarmine Museum of Art open to the general public from 12:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Wednesday, February 13, 2013, 12:00-1:00 p.m.

Gallery talk: with Philip Eliaoph, Ph.D., Professor of Art History, Fairfield University and author of *Colleen Browning: The Enchantment of Realism*, Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery, Quick Center for the Arts, 12:00 - 1:00 p.m.