Colleen Browning: The Early Works & A Brush With Magic Exhibition Catalogue

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COLLEEN BROWNING

1918 - 2003
The Early Works
Bellarmine Museum of Art

A Brush with Magic
Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery

January 24 - March 24, 2013
Fairfield University
One of the greatest pleasures I enjoy in my capacity as director and chief curator of the Bellarmine Museum of Art is the opportunity to step into the very lives of the artists whose works we exhibit here. This is certainly the case with Colleen Browning (1918-2003). Though her name was not terribly familiar to me before our colleague, Dr. Philip Eliasoph, proposed an exhibition devoted to Browning several years ago, I soon grew to appreciate her critical importance in the constellation of painters working in America in the second half of the 20th century. Along the way, I developed a parallel fascination with this enigmatic artist’s chameleon-like character.

Colleen Browning surged onto the American art scene in 1949, arousing the attention and admiration of fellow artists and landing squarely in the media’s crosshairs. The vicissitudes of taste, however, meant that realist painters like her were soon eclipsed by adherents of Abstract Expressionism and other non-figurative, non-narrative art movements. Yet Browning stood her ground. Despite modifying or modulating her aesthetic as she matured and evolved, the artist maintained her commitment to realism. Browning’s clear technical prowess, coupled with her extraordinary capacity to continually reinvent herself within the bounds of the representational tradition, mark her as a painter worthy of our attention. That she was a woman—meaning that, by default, she faced substantially more obstacles than her male counterparts in the testosterone-fueled world of contemporary art—only increases our admiration.

Browning’s name might not have endured were it not for the commitment of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art (SAMA) to preserve, protect, and promote her rich artistic legacy. Under the dedicated leadership of Director Gary Moyers, SAMA has not only honored Browning but also saved her from the veiling mists of time by assembling, and traveling, the extraordinary monographic show that we are proud to have mounted jointly with Fairfield University’s Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery. To Mr. Moyers and his entire staff—above all, Ms. Bobby Moore and Dr. Scott V. Dimond—we extend our sincerest thanks for their collegiality and their gracious assistance at every step along the way.

Dr. Eliasoph, too, has insulated Browning from oblivion through his fine monograph, *Colleen Browning: The Enchantment of Realism* (2011), which provides readers with a 360° look at the life and work of this talented, yet reclusive, figure. We are indebted to him not only for this important contribution to the art historical literature but also for generously sharing his time and knowledge in support of this show; above all, through the compelling essay, *Colleen Browning: ‘Through A Glass, Darkly’ – A Revisionist Light,* that follows.

The Bellarmine Museum of Art relies on the beneficence of its supporters, who enable us to offer high quality exhibitions and related programming to the public, free of charge. This show is no exception: *Colleen Browning: The Early Works* would not have been possible were it not for the generosity of Whole Foods Market, *Venü* magazine, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, all of whom we thank sincerely. We are similarly indebted to the Robert Lehman Foundation and to Maritime Motors (Fairfield), who helped to underwrite our programming. Additional thanks are extended to Fairfield University’s president, the Rev. Jeffrey von Arx, S.J., together with Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Rev. Paul Fitzgerald, S.J., and College of Arts and Sciences Dean Robin Crabtree, Ph.D., all of whom have, in their own ways, made their commitment to the arts very clear indeed. Last but assuredly not least, we thank our colleagues at the Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery, Gary Alan Wood and Dr. Joon Lee, for their collaborative spirit, as well as those institutions and private collectors whose willingness to share their works made this show complete; above all, the National Academy Museum, the Coleman Barkin Family, and several anonymous lenders.

Jill Deupi J.D., Ph.D.
Founding Director and Chief Curator, Bellarmine Museum of Art
The Walsh Art Gallery has an extensive 22-year history of showcasing contemporary art in exhibits and experiences that are both meaningful and memorable. It's a place that brings together people of every background – on campus and in the community – to discover, learn from, and be touched by art.

Innately, contemporary art compels us to confront novel views of objects and scenes, where we can see the essence of the artist in each work. This is surely true of Colleen Browning: A Brush with Magic. In mounting this exciting show – jointly with the Bellarmine Museum of Art – we are the beneficiaries of this unique opportunity to access her genius and gain a fresh perspective on her important contributions in a career spanning more than 60 years.

Perhaps it is the fact that she found inspiration in her work from everyday life that provides a sense of immediacy, curiosity, connection, and even affection for what she has created. It serves to stir our deepest curiosities as art lovers, and causes us to appreciate the powerful capacity of her work to turn our heads – and our imaginations – as we rediscover the world around us.

The artist herself bore witness to this, stating: “I attempt to interpret my world, the world surrounding me, as clearly as possible; and as I live in and see new places or things, it reflects itself in my work.” (Philip Eliasoph. Colleen Browning: The Enchantment of Realism. Hudson Hills Press, LLC. 2011)

The works displayed in the Walsh Gallery – which represent Browning’s career post-1960 – make possible our deeper understanding of her intentions, life experiences, and the artistic legacy she leaves for us to enjoy.

The Walsh Art Gallery recognizes the many contributions of support and expertise in organizing the exhibit: our partners Gary Moyer and his staff at the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art, Carey Weber and Dr. Jill Deupi of Fairfield University’s Bellarmine Museum of Art, and Dr. Philip Eliasoph, for his expertise and generosity of insight, as well as our exclusive magazine partner, Venü magazine.

Gary Alan Wood
Director, Quick Center for the Arts

Holiday, 1951-52. Oil on canvas, 13 ft x 22 ft. inches. Collection of the Coleman Barkin Family.
It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key — Winston Churchill, assessing the USSR’s duplicity in 1939

On June 14, 1949 at Pier 92, next to Manhattan’s newly constructed West Side Highway, 16-year-old Colleen Browning slipped effortlessly into her wide berth. Among the passengers disembarking that morning was 31-year-old Colleen Browning (1918-2003), an aspiring British painter of Irish ancestry. With an unshakable confidence in her artistic powers, movie-star looks, and the love of her life waiting for her on the other side of the Customs desk, Browning was ready for her “rendezvous with destiny.”

Through Fairfield University’s dual-platform retrospective of this remarkable female artist, we learn how a thoroughly British subject came to observe, assimilate, and even assume a brief leadership role in the narrative of American art in the second half of the 20th century. Although Browning’s name today lacks household recognition, her story dramatically illustrates the principal movements and sidelined tensions — in American art in the years after 1952.

This landmark retrospective provides critical tools for peeling away the layers of Browning’s astonishingly rich artistic legacy, a decade after her death. Her artworks have never shined forth with such luminosity; but her impenetrably obscured artistic intentions, and even her age behind a beguiling series of illusionistic images, deceptive clues, and inspired veils. Browning was aloof, keeping herself at arm’s length from any meaningful friendships, snubbing neighbors in her apartment building for 40 years, and flatly telling a young college newspaper reporter: “I am a recluse.” And she was an enigma. Hailed as one of America’s most sensitive painters of adolescents caught in the web of an impossibly fast-paced world, Browning was also its own epic romantic adventure.

The daughter of one of England’s most highly-decorated major generals in World War II, Langley Browning, she often cloaked her identity, her artistic intentions, and even her age behind a beguiling series of illusionistic images, deceptive clues, and inspired veils. Browning was aloof, keeping herself at arm’s length from any meaningful friendships, snubbing neighbors in her apartment building for 40 years, and flatly telling a young college newspaper reporter: “I am a recluse.” And she was an enigma. Hailed as one of America’s most sensitive painters of adolescents caught in the web of an impossibly fast-paced world, Browning was also its own epic romantic adventure.

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The art Establishment and fellow artists also took note. American master painter George Tooker, an early colleague and friend of Browning (they often exhibited consecutively in the same gallery), was just one of many to recognize her talents, noting: “I have such pleasant memories of [her] . . . I admired her work and I told her so.” (personal communication with the author, 2010)

Lyrically poetic images of African-American children and Hispanic street urchins painted From life on the street below her fourth-floor East Harlem walk-up earned Browning entry into the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Annual exhibition, won her second prize in Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Art Institute International Art Exhibition, and secured a purchase prize at San Francisco’s Legion of Honor Competition. Her

Her personal life, too, was brimming with promise, thanks to her dazzlingly handsome fiancé, Oxford-educated, English Romantic literature professor, Dr. Geoffrey Wagner.

Shoeburyness, Essex (where her father, a gunnery officer, was stationed at the end of WWI after being injured by Germany artillery). With a wink, we might dismiss this as a trivial transgression.

Indeed, a plausible Feminist context permits Browning’s sleight of hand as a response to the nefarious trifecta of an impenetrable glass ceiling, fleeting youthfulness, and enduring vanity. But a more nuanced interpretation repels that Browning had constructed an expanded identity that replicated her own exceptionally clever illusionism. As she herself had stated: “I am always a realist, an illusionist if you prefer.” (Howard DaLee Spencer, Colleen Browning: Recent Paintings, exhibition catalogue [Wichita, KS: Wichita Art Museum, 1986]).

A striking aptitude, endowed with an array of artistic abilities, and armed with a fruitful array of prestigious awards and competitive scholarships, Browning was still being talked in the critical acclaim engendered by her first solo exhibition at a Piccadilly Square gallery only a month earlier when she alighted down a narrow stairway in 1949. She was right to be optimistic, for her talent was soon attracting the attention of critics and fellow artists alike. Within three years of her arrival, the completely unknown immigrant artist had gained impressive recognition, including coveted placements in TIME, Newsweek, The Nation, Art Digest.

1949...
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Fortunately Colleen Browning’s legacy has been preserved through the diligent efforts of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art (SAMA) in southwestern Pennsylvania. Far from the critical and commercial trends of the art world’s epicenter in Manhattan, this regional museum serves as the chief repository, and principal champion, of Browning’s artistic legacy. Her importance was made abundantly clear at a webcast symposium (streamed live across the nation in September 2012) where the eminent art historian and Edward Hopper scholar Dr. Gail Levin congratulated SAMA for vigilantly protecting Browning’s estate, and shielding her from “the ranks of erased women artists.”

To wit, Browning showcased a virtuoso’s skill for capturing “the look” of established artists like Ben Shahn, Joseph Hirsch, and Robert Vickrey, the introspection of painters like Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth; and, in her later years, the motifs of Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Audrey Flack, and J. M. Basquiat; American painters at the forefront – and on the front pages of the glossy art magazines – in their day. There are glimpses of genius in her career, particularly when she foregrounds her own voice and vision.

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In a prolific professional career spanning seven decades, Colleen Browning donned many identities while experimenting with several artistic styles. Responding like quicksilver, she became a visual thermometer of painting styles between frozen academicism and a newly evaporating dematerialization. Towards the end, in 1989, she told American Artist Magazine’s August 8, 1949 color spread featuring Jackson Pollock asked the provocative question: “Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” Meanwhile Barnett Newman predicted a new narrative art was dead.

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Swiftly adapting to the American scene, Browning proved just how protean – and quick – she could be. Each decade intervened to rescue and sustain her identity into the present. Swiftly adapting to the American scene, Browning proved just how protean – and quick – she could be. Each decade intervened to rescue and sustain her identity into the present.

That the soon-to-be-wed Browning-Wagner’s chose the United States as their new home is not surprising. A wave of post-war exiled artists and writers from their generation was magnetically attracted to the almost boundary-less promise of mid-century America. Newly crowned the world’s super-power, the States were still basking in the afterglow of defeating totalitarianism on a global stage. The road ahead, however, was not all smooth for Browning: realist colleagues – Isabel Bishop, Henry Koerner, Bernard Karfiol, John Koch, or Priscilla Warren Roberts – had we not handwriting on the wall: their gig was up. Browning may well have fallen off the radar screen like her less fortunate step with Nazi era official propaganda or Soviet-styled Socialist Realism. The hard-core academic realists saw the age with “1,000 years of non-representational art,” while a generation of classically-trained artists from London’s Art Students League were being lambasted as “hacks,” “cornpone illustrators,” or, worse still, crypto-fascists in the champagne officially uncorked, American art for the remainder of the 20th century was to be dominated by abstraction, avant-gardism, and anti-formalist post-modernism. Narrative art was dead.

The first half of this century had belonged to Paris, but the second half will be claimed by New York!” With a Greenwich Village “beatnik” gathering of abstract painters, poets, and “pink diaper baby” dissidents, predicting: “The first half of this century had belonged to Paris, but the second half will be claimed by New York!”

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Author of over 30 academic studies, romantic novels, and bodice-ripping “pulp” novellas, Wagner also published "The Sands of Valor" (1967), a first-hand account of tank warfare with his Welsh Guards unit pitted against Rommel's Afrika Korps. In a prolific professional career spanning seven decades, Colleen Browning donned many identities while experimenting with several artistic styles. Responding like quicksilver, she became a visual thermometer of painting styles between frozen academicism and a newly evaporating dematerialization. Towards the end, in 1989, she told American Artist Magazine’s August 8, 1949 color spread featuring Jackson Pollock asked the provocative question: “Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” Meanwhile Barnett Newman predicted a new narrative art was dead.

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Goyave, ca. 1956-57. Oil on canvas. 23 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches. Collection of the National Academy Museum, New York.

East Harlem Street Scene, 1953. Oil on canvas. 15 1/4 x 40 inches. Private Collection, New Jersey.

Checklist

Examples of the Application of Perspective to Pictorial Composition

[36x73][2011.036]
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
22 ½ x 30 ¾ inches
Gouache, watercolor, ink, and graphite on paper
Untitled
[Balloon Festival], n.d.
[2010.049]
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
18 ½ x 14 inches

Examples of the Application of Perspective to Pictorial Composition

[36x170]
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
Gift of the artist
Watercolor and graphite on paper
[Image 3], n.d.
Examples of the Application of Perspective to Pictorial Composition

[36x203]
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
Gift of the artist
8 ¾ x 12 ½ inches
Watercolor and graphite on paper
Composition

Examples of the Application of Perspective to Pictorial Composition

[36x322]
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
Gift of the artist
18 x 10 ½ inches
Graphite on paper
Portrait of an Officer
[General Browning], n.d.
[2011.112]
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
19 ¾ x 24 ¾ inches (board)
Watercolor, gouache, ink, and graphite on cardboard
Untitled Study for Stage Set Design
[Orchestra], 1945
[2011.040]
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
18 ¼ x 25 ¼ inches
Gouache and graphite on paper
Salisbury AD 1942, 1942
[2011.053]
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
13 ¾ x 22 ¾ inches
Gouache on paper
Resurrection, 1941
[2011.041]
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
9 x 12 inches
Oil and ink on paper
Gathering Water, 1945
[Study for Stage Set Decoration]
[2011.046]
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
8 x 30 ½ inches
Watercolor, gouache and graphite on paper
Rio Bamba Restaurant Mural Study 2, 1950
Watercolor, gouache and graphite on paper
8 ¾ x 9 ½ inches
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[2011.052]
Holidays, 1951-52 (page 7)
Oil on canvas
13 ½ x 22 ½ inches
Gift of the Coleman Bank Family
Private Collection, New Jersey
Self-Portrait, 1965 (back cover)
Oil on canvas
24 x 20 inches
Collection of the National Academy Museum, New York
Bathing Child and Child, 1952
Oil on linen canvas mounted on board
11 x 23 inches
Private Collection, Connecticut
Fire Escape II, 1953 (page 10)
Oil on linen canvas
30 x 8 ½ inches
Collection of the Coleman Bank Family
East Harlem Street Scene, 1953 (page 13)
Oil on canvas
15 ½ x 40 inches
Private Collection, New Jersey
Self-Portrait, n.d. (cover)
Oil on board
7 x 7 inches
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
At Murala, 1956
Oil on canvas
23 ½ x 23 ½ inches
Private Collection, New Jersey
Gayave, ca. 1956-57 (page 12)
Oil on canvas
23 ½ x 23 ½ inches
Collection of the National Academy Museum, New York
Self-Portrait, 1965 (back cover)
Oil on canvas
24 x 20 inches
Collection of the National Academy Museum, New York

Bellarmine Museum of Art, Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT
January 24 - March 24, 2013

Colleen Browning: The Early Works

Bellantone Museum of Art, Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT
January 24 - March 24, 2013

Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
20 x 14 inches
Graphite, ink, and gouache on paper
19 x 24 ¼ inches (board)
Garden of Eden, 1931 (page 5)
Watercolor and graphite on paper
19 x 14 inches
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[2010.049]
Garden of Eden, 1931 (page 5)
Watercolor and graphite on paper
19 x 14 inches
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[2011.039]
Garden of Eden, 1931 (page 5)
Watercolor and graphite on paper
19 x 14 inches
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
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Watercolor and graphite on paper
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Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[2011.049]
Garden of Eden, 1931 (page 5)
Watercolor and graphite on paper
19 x 14 inches
Gift of the Estate of Geoffrey Wagner
Collection of Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[2011.049]
New Times One (Self Portrait), 1970
Oil on canvas
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.127]

Wee, 1991
Oil on canvas
20 x 36 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.130]

Flooded Field, 1969
Oil on canvas
27 x 50 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.125]

Door Window, 1977
Oil on canvas
17 x 23 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.131]

Doors Windows, 1977
Oil on canvas
20 x 23 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.131]

Suitcase, 1965
Oil on canvas
27 x 39 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.127]

J.R. Eye, 1997
Oil on canvas
33 x 40 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.127]

The Adder, 1994
Oil on canvas
27 x 34 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.127]

Poas Volcano, 1991
Oil on canvas
18 x 36 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.130]

Calling Back a Dream, 1994
Oil on canvas
22 x 34 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.130]

Iguassu III, 1985
Oil on canvas
36 x 46 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.134]

Jubilee, 1995
Oil on canvas
20 x 32 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.127]

The Impossible Shore, 1994
Oil on canvas
24 x 36 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.134]

The Cemetery, 1967
Oil on canvas
27 x 50 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.125]

Uncertain Applause: In Two Minds, 1997
Oil on canvas
22 x 34 ½ inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.148]

Rising Tide, 1994
Oil on canvas
29 x 40 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.138]

Fracture, 1995
Oil on canvas
28 x 35 ½ inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.147]

The Astrologer of Chantinelle, 1997
Oil on canvas
44 x 52 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.147]

Iguassu, 1985
Oil on canvas
36 x 46 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.130]

Protest II, 1977
Oil on canvas
20 x 23 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.131]

Chevron, 1977
Oil on canvas
31 x 41 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.131]

Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.127]

16

[99.132]

Fracture, 1995
Oil on canvas
28 x 35 ½ inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.147]

Iguassu III, 1985
Oil on canvas
36 x 46 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.134]

The Letter, 1985
Oil on canvas
26 x 38 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.134]

Mindscape, 1973
Oil on canvas
28 x 36 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.133]

Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.120]

Gift of the estate of Geoffrey Wagner
Collection of Fairfield University

Rut, 1997
Oil on canvas
40 x 50 inches
Gift of the artist
Collection of the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art
[99.130]

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