The Runner, 1976



For nearly a decade Joan Brown has made her life experiences the subject matter of her art. Rather than narrative situations, Brown has sought to make prototypical those of her thoughts and activities she felt were most fundamental to human experience. The resulting imagery has generally been located in paintings. However, a series of rarely exhibited sculptures also exists. These are being shown as a group, separate from the paintings, for the first time in MATRIX.

Brown can be related to the artistic movement in Northern California of the 1950's and 1960's known as the "Bay Area Figurative" style. Pioneered by David Park, the movement was notable for offering a figurative alternative to Abstract Expressionism in New York; Brown was particularly influenced by her teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute, Elmer Bischoff. While figurative, Bay Area painting (and Brown's work in particular) tended toward an Abstract-Expressionist brushstroke. However, at the end of the 1960's Brown began to apply paint in large, flat areas. At the beginning of the 1970's, her subject matter changed, as well. Previously consisting of animals to a great extent, her art became increasingly personal in that she began to add her own image into the paintings.

Several sculptural efforts from the 1960's survive, but the physical necessity of remodeling her studio caused Brown to turn once more to this medium in 1973. Between 1973 and 1976 she produced a series of eight,

highly provocative works which comprise this MATRIX unit. These works capture Brown's essential themes: romantic longing, the transforming potential of travel, spartan physical activity, and animal vitality. On one level these are subjects drawn from the artist's own life experience. The wolf image, used in both her painting and her sculpture, is the result of a friendship Brown once cultivated with a wolf in the San Francisco Zoo. Similarly, the artist's consistent use of the swimmer can be related to the fact that Brown is an avid swimmer. Yet the tone of these works is only personal when the details of Brown's life are known. Otherwise, she has given to each theme a breadth and monumentality that speak of general experience. This is accomplished by reducing the individualization of character to a minimum while emphasizing motives rendered through mime gestures. Supporting the sacrifice of personal psyche is the public nature of the situations depicted.

Individually and in relation to one another, Brown's themes have considerable archetypal power. Running has become an everyman experience in the current period of American life; like running, swimming has connotations of both exercise and survival as humanity is shown using only its basic, physical being to move. Similarly, the wolf stands lifesize and unencumbered, like the runner, as a totally vital being. In contrast, humanity assumes an artful, psuedo-elegance of 1940's vintage in Luxury Liner, Dancers on a Car, Plane and Smoker. Thus, extremes between "natural," physical activity and "unnatural," cultural

affectation are used to define the character of human existence. A life of manners, however, has its rewards in Brown's iconography. There is romance and, in turn, metamorphosis from conventional eoncerns to a more enchanted realm. (More recently in Brown's paintings, a similar transformation has occurred through the vehicle of Egyptian imagery.) Overall, Brown's themes can perhaps be joined into a life-cycle depiction of woman, living in the period coinciding with the artist's own life. The tone of the work is at times self-deprecating and at other moments serious and poignant. By emphasizing extremes, a certain absurdity about human life is revealed.

Most of Brown's sculptures can be directly related to her contemporaneous paintings. In a few cases the sculpture preceded the painting, e.g. the Runner, but for the most part these sculptures were done after the paintings. The sequence indicates that the sculptures were not conceived as models for paintings. Brown has stated that she followed this sequence in order to see her imagery in three-dimensional form and in a different environment or context. By moving beyond the canvas, the figure is denied what for Brown was often an organizing backdrop. Comparison with the sculptures indicates Brown's flat, painted backgrounds are generally decorative. Once the figure moves into actual space, the largeness of Brown's archetypal vision increases, and the isolation of the figure and its gesture grow in significance.

Like Picasso in many ways, Brown has, throughout her career, freely adopted

subject matter or interest. Moreover, she has lived her life in her paintings, much as Picasso had done after 1925. In contrast to him, however, Brown has, naturally, monumentalized female existence. Not since before World War I has such an approach been in the mainstream of art. Brown is an important participant in an artistic push of the last decade toward a rich, contentladen, figurative imagery. Unlike earlier precedents, Brown's style has been rendered with the simplest, almost primitive, visual means and with an emphasis on the single, highly evokative and immediately apprehendable image.

stylistic modes to fit her

Joan Brown was born in San Francisco in 1938, and obtained a B.F.A. and M.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute. She currently lives in San Francisco and is a faculty member of the University of California, Berkeley.

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Works in MATRIX:

Luxury Liner, 1973, painted cardboard and string, 29 1/4" x 44" x 10 1/2". Lent by the artist.

Dancers on a Car, 1973, painted cardboard and string, 50" x 64" x 10". Lent by the artist.

Smoker, 1973, painted card-board and string, 21 1/4" x 19 1/3" x 8 1/2". Lent by the artist.

Swimmers #2, 1974, painted wood and aluminum, 50 1/4" x 50" x 36 1/4". Lent by the artist.

Swimmer, 1974, painted card-

board and string, 16 1/2" x 36 1/2" x 28 1/4". Lent by the artist.

Plane, 1976, painted card-board and string, 11 1/2" x 47 1/2" x 40". Lent by the artist.

Runner, 1976, painted card-board and string, 75 3/4" x 71 3/4" x 36 1/2". Lent by the artist.

Black Wolf, 1974, painted galvanized aluminum, 49 1/4" x 66 1/2" x 36". Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions: 6 Gallery, SF '57; Spatsa Gallery, SF '58; Batman Gallery, SF '61; Staempfli Gallery, NY '60, '61, '64; Primus-Stuart Galleries, LA '61, '62; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art '71; San Francisco Art Institute '73; University Art Museum, Berkeley '74; Charles Campbell Gallery, SF '74, '75; Allan Frumkin Gallery, NY '74, '76; Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago '75; Hansen Fuller Gallery, SF '76, '79; Newport Harbor Art Museum, CA '78.

Selected group exhibitions: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Annual Painting and Sculpture Exhibition of the San Francisco Art Assoc. '57, '58; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Young America 1960 '60; Art Institute, Chicago, 64th American Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture '61; Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture '61, '74; M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, SF, Phelan Award Exhibition '63; David Stuart Galleries, LA '64; University Art Museum, Berkeley, Funk '67; San

Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era '76; The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, Representations of America '77, '78; Hansen-Fuller Gallery, SF '77, '78; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, 1977 Biennial Exhibition '77; The University of Akron, OH, Joan Brown 1973-1976 '78; The New Museum, NY, Bad Painting '78; Independent Curators, Inc., DC, From Self Portrait to Autobiography '78.

Selected bibliography about Brown:

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Richardson, Brenda. Joan Brown. (Berkeley: University Art Museum '74).

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