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Guru Followers Killed With Joan Brown Accident in India claims lives of 3 from Bay Area

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Indian authorities announced yesterday that two American members of an ashram, both from the Bay Area, were also killed Friday in the accident that claimed the life of renowned San Francisco artist Joan Brown.

Bonnie Lynn Mainric, 43, of San Francisco, and Michael Oliver, 25, a Santa Cruz comedian, died with Brown, 52, when a concrete turret from the floor above collapsed while they were installing a mosaic obelisk at the Heritage Museum in Proddatura. The museum is dedicated to Indian holy man Satya Sai Baba.

Mainric and Oliver were described as followers of the guru and Brown was his personal friend but not his acolyte.

Brown had been a leading figure in the Bay Area art scene for more than 30 years. She was born in San Francisco, and was known for an adventuresome attitude that was not limited to her art. During the 1970s, while she was exhibiting her paintings in major galleries in San Francisco and New York, she also successfully led a suit against the San Francisco Rowing Club that forced that venerable institution to admit women.

But she was most appreciated for her art. "I'm very sorrowful," said Elmer Bischoff, dean of Bay Area painters and Brown's first mentor at the San Francisco Art Institute, then known as the California School of Fine Arts. Bischoff underscored Brown's role as an inspiration to younger artists. "A lot of students feel they don't have any talent, and she kind of lifted them above that self-doubt," he said.

Brown first gained attention for her work at age 20, in 1958, as a member of the Bay Area group of figurative painters. Chronicle art critic Alfred Frankenstein later wrote of her that "she entered the California School of Fine Arts at the height of its fascination with slab-thick paint, seethingly energetic surfaces, great acreages of canvas, and a brusque, loose handling of the human figure. Naturally enough, she started that way." He went on to note that "no stereotype ever fits Joan Brown."

The pressure of early success led her to drop out of the art world in the early '60s. She returned to the public eye in 1974 with a show at the University Art Museum in Berkeley. The same year, she joined the University of California faculty. By then, and for years afterward, her work, which ranged into the sculptural field, was marked by the influence of Egyptian art and mythology, Aztec and Inca art from pre-Columbian America, and Indian dance.

However, versatility of style remained her hallmark. In 1982, she had a show at Fuller Goldeen Gallery in San Francisco that included paintings inspired by classic works of Ingres and others.

She is survived by her husband, San Francisco police Captain Mike Hebel, and by her son, Noel Neri, from her first marriage, to Bay Area artist Manuel Neri.

Two memorials are scheduled. The first will be hosted by faculty and students at the University Art Museum in Berkeley on Thursday at 4:45 p.m.

A second will be held Sunday at 11 a.m. at the Art Institute on Chestnut Street in San Francisco.

Donations have been requested for the SPCA.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO, JOAN BROWN, Noted artist was 52 , BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

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