

GEORGE ADAMS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

Joan Brown

GEORGE ADAMS GALLERY
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When the Bay Area artist and UC Berkeley professor Joan Brown died in 1990 at age fifty-two, she left behind a vast and unruly oeuvre that refused to adhere to a singular style. Her work's steady indifference to prevailing artistic modes made it a touchstone for Marcia Tucker's 1978 "Bad' Painting" survey at the New Museum in New York, and in turn contributed to her career's marginalization on the West Coast. But for all its freewheeling experimentation—deeply inspired by friends such as Wallace Berman, Jay DeFeo, and Bruce and Jean Conner—the bulk of Brown's art has one theme: her life. Decidedly autobiographical and introspective, Brown's portraits of her son, lovers, friends, pets, and herself are among the standouts in the current gathering of her drawings at this gallery.



Joan Brown, *The Opening*, 1975, oil pastel and graphite on paper, 24 x 36".

Effectively a miniretrospective, the thirty-four pieces span three decades of her truncated output. Brown died, tragically, while she was installing a tiled obelisk in Puttaparthi, India; her work had become increasingly focused on spiritual matters, which may be just another reason critics and historians have been quick to cite her "regionalist" ties to San Francisco. Such bland categorizations were of no matter to the artist. In this show, mixed in with mid-1970s landscapes and portraits, are three parodic works showing skeletons gallivanting around art-world contexts. In *The Opening*, 1975, one waggishly studies a price list that is overrun with dollar signs. According to biographer Karen Tsujimoto, Brown made these particular pieces during a transitional period, working swiftly, both to challenge herself and as a way of opening up an alternative to painting. "I don't care if they end up in the garbage can," the artist quipped. "It's the process that's important . . . The skeleton is a good quick way of getting these gestures and the interaction that I want." Yet such drawings also evince a broad criticality and razor-sharp edge not often attributed to her work. Seen today amid the various resurgences of painterly figuration, Brown's local, personal, and specific wit looks significant—and radically regionalist.

— Lauren O'Neill-Butler

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