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## Mia Brownell: Skeptical Realism

by Nathan Spoor

Mia Brownell's work boldly and elegantly draws close and blurs the lines that separate classical still life, the abstract, and high-level conceptual work. Brownell pushes this expressive engagement with still life by modifying the picture plane to a point where the subjects become a meditation on both the visible and invisible aspects of themselves. Both

iconography and realism define the subjects and the range of emotions that come with their depiction.

Brownell calls this "skeptical realism." "A chicken, for example," she states, "is a tasty edible, and also an industrial, corporate, commercial, consumer product." Brownell's paintings simultaneously portray the outward appearance of her subjects and express the life that lies beneath the surface.

A tenured professor of Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Brownell confesses that from a very young age she was certain to be an artist. A child prodigy, she had a contract as an illustrator with a greeting card company before she was a teenager.





Academic training as a painter followed suit at the age of 14 as Brownell entered high school at the Baltimore School for the Arts. The artist grew at amazing strides to one day realize her inspiration in the tradition and methods of still life painting. These works are intended to create a new vocabulary, one that takes into consideration a much larger context of her subjects. When Brownell paints about food, she is considering not only how it was grown, she approaches a much larger issue: she questions what it means to be human in the age of biotechnology. If you are what you eat, what are you eating?

Brownell's interaction with still life painting is a reflective one. To hear her tell it, the dichotomy between the natural world and the world of human culture is an essential, but often over-looked, component of the history of still life painting. Foods and objects that claim the starring roles in these paintings speak equally to the aesthetic, moral and commercial values of their respective cultures as they speak to their own beauty and the creative vision of the painters.

Currently, she is exploring a continuation of a series called *G(l)aze*, in which she objectifies the male nude as a subject by introducing a male chicken (a cock) as a trope. Each one is named after an artist whose work tends to objectify the female nude as a subject. Examples include John Currin, Lucian Freud and Philip Pearlstein. These paintings are purposefully made small.

Recently, Brownell's work has been exhibited to great aplomb. She has had sold out shows in New York as well as Boston, and has been sought out by international tastemakers as well. Her paintings were raved over at a recent exhibition at Bo Lee Gallery in the UK, which featured such prominent company as conceptual genius Damien Hirst. Brownell's next

solo show will be in 2010 at Dvorak Sec Contemporary, a new gallery in Prague, Czech Republic.

When asked what advice she would pass on to hungry minds and readers, she replies gently, "Try and keep pace with the evolution of your imagination."<sup>4</sup>

