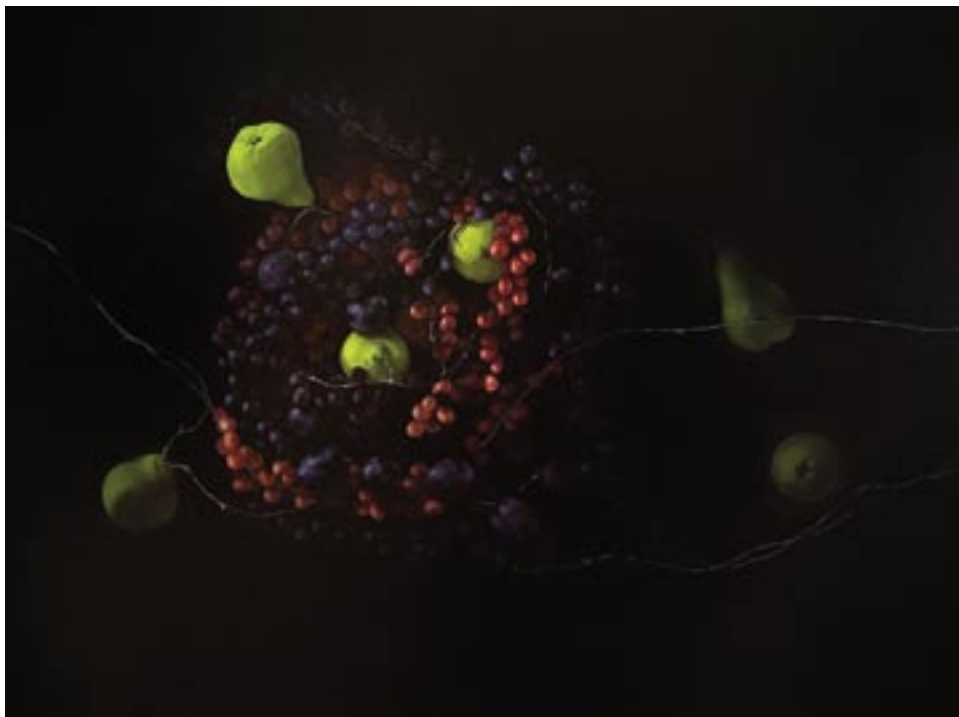


# Mia Brownell

*complexities of the garden*



Inside cover: Still Life with Pear, Plum and Grape, 2005. Oil on canvas, 32x42 inches. Private collection, New York, NY; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.

Front cover: Detail, *Still Life with Pear, Plum and Grape IX*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 98x78 inches. Private collection, Carteret, NJ; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.

# Mia Brownell

*complexities of the garden*



november 11 - december 23, 2006

big orbit gallery





*Still Life with Pear, Plum and Grape IX*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 98x78 inches.  
Private collection, Carteret, NJ; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.





*Still Life with Pear, Plum, Grape and Apple*, 2005. Oil on Canvas, 60x36 inches.  
Collection Michelle Simon, La Selva Beach, CA; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.



### Mia Brownell's Paintings

Serious still-life food paintings first appeared in Europe in the 16th century and developed into a major category of subject in the 17th century, particularly in the Netherlands. Food images whet appetites and played with notions of both physical pleasure and health. Symbols of death and decay would frequently appear in the savory paintings of such specialists in the genre as Pieter Claesz. and Abraham van Beyeren, but those warnings of our mortality never quite overwhelm the sensation of bodily delight. And the importance of food as medicine, as robust nourishment, further promoted the powerful sense of well-being expressed in images of markets and tables overflowing with goodies. Mia Brownell's paintings continue and enrich these traditions.

Brownell, like her artistic forebears, couples pleasure with physical science. Earlier artists placed complimentary foods side by side in meal and kitchen paintings, envisioning a diet balanced in accordance with the ancient medical prescriptions of Hippocrates and Galen (e.g., warm and moist foods should be accompanied by cool and dry foods to attain good health). But Brownell prefers modern science to ancient conceptions of the body's four humors and their proper balance. She entwines luscious grapes and strawberries with Watson and Crick's double helix, circulatory systems, and planetary orbits. She meditates on the stuff we eat, the role of food as corporeal necessity and as delicious excitement.

Fruit has been the most frequent subject of food paintings ever since Caravaggio painted a basket of pears and apples and grapes around the year 1600. Fruit possessed forceful symbolic meanings (e.g., Eve's apple, the wine of Catholic communion, the sexuality of figs), but fruit was also brilliantly beautiful. People displayed bowls of fruit as they would vases of flowers—as objects of visual delight. Brownell's colorful objects never lose their identities as artistically handsome creations, no matter how much they spiral into the diagrams of biology or astronomy. In fact, the symmetry



and order of her depictions of food can almost look like wallpaper patterns, spreading fields of roomful contentment. The more recent fruit pictures display none of the slightly queasy qualities of Brownell's earlier organ and poultry images. Her chicken-wing series of 2000—looking like the action photos of Muybridge and Marey in the late 19th century—lead to thoughts of emotionless autopsies, and *Dinner for One: My Olestra Fantasy* plays with the forms of slimy human innards. The fruit paintings, in contrast, speak of beauty and taste without inner distress.

Brownell's animated fruit images suggest growth and change. The small fruits writhe and multiply, coalesce and disperse, and vibrate like digestive peristalsis. These mergers of science and pleasing sustenance create visions of constant movement, as if the life of ourselves and the stuff we eat were a continuous reproductive dance. The plain backgrounds place the food in uncertain contexts—inside ourselves, under a microscope, in the heavens, spreading like water or ant colonies on the ground. The paintings are in every case hymns to a pulsing life force. In front of these works, we're not in the supermarket or at lunch. The powerful symmetrical structure and textbook-illustration analogies of these images imply grander meanings. Brownell's paintings make us aware that our daily acts of consumption link us to the fundamental schemes of the natural universe.

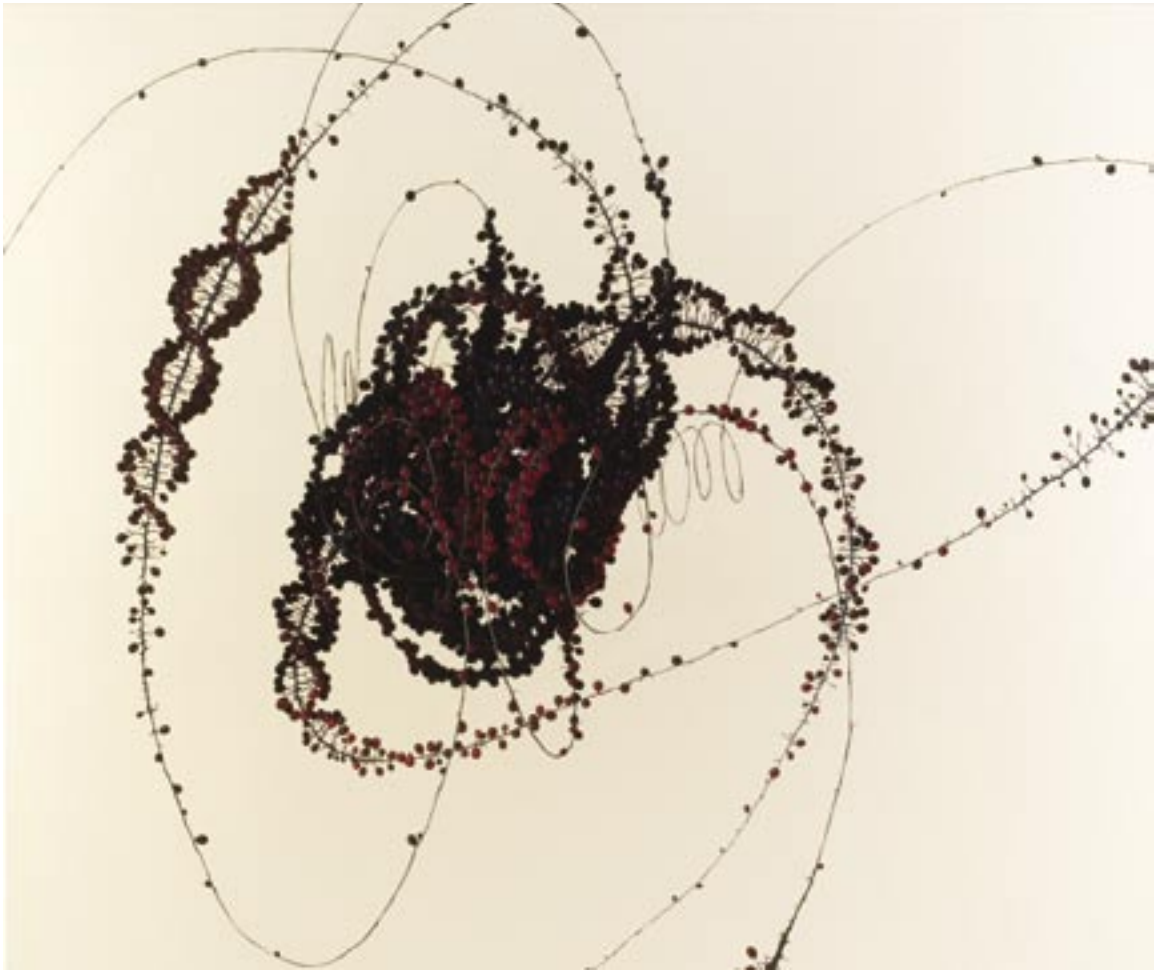
Kenneth Bendiner  
Professor of Art History  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee



This page: *Dinner for One: My Olestra Fantasy*, 1996. Oil on canvas, 60x84 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Previous page: *Still Life with Pear, Apricot and Grape II*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 20x20 inches. Collection of Erica and Marc Strongin, Riverdale, NY; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.





*Still Life with Thoughts of Jelly*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 54x64 inches. Courtesy of the artist.





*Still Life with Pear and Grape (For Wave Hill)*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 54x72 inches.  
Collection Carrie Schwartz, New York, NY; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.



### The Paintings of Mia Brownell

Still-life painting is sometimes regarded as a decorative genre that renders domestic scenes with masterful illusion but lacks the profound messages conveyed by art that addresses themes from history or myth. To the attentive eye, however, still life pictures have always carried meanings far beyond their ornamental virtues.

This is especially notable with paintings from older traditions that employ so-called *memento mori* motifs—remember death—which often appear in works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If one looks closely at such paintings, a beautifully arranged table laid with luscious fruits, gleaming oysters, wine poured into thin crystal, may also be seen to display a melon split and rotting, scavenging mice, invading insects—all rendered with delicate precision. Spilled cups, broken lute strings, even the occasional grinning skull might be included in the scene to bring to mind the transience of human life in the midst of the sensory enjoyments of the table.

Mia Brownell's paintings offer a postmodern reversal of this kind of double message. Painted with exactitude and detail, her pears, grapes, and apricots are nestled in what at first appear to be abstract wreaths. Heirs to the legacy of still life, their swirling dynamism is anything but "still." But if symbols of death attend some older arrangements, Brownell's



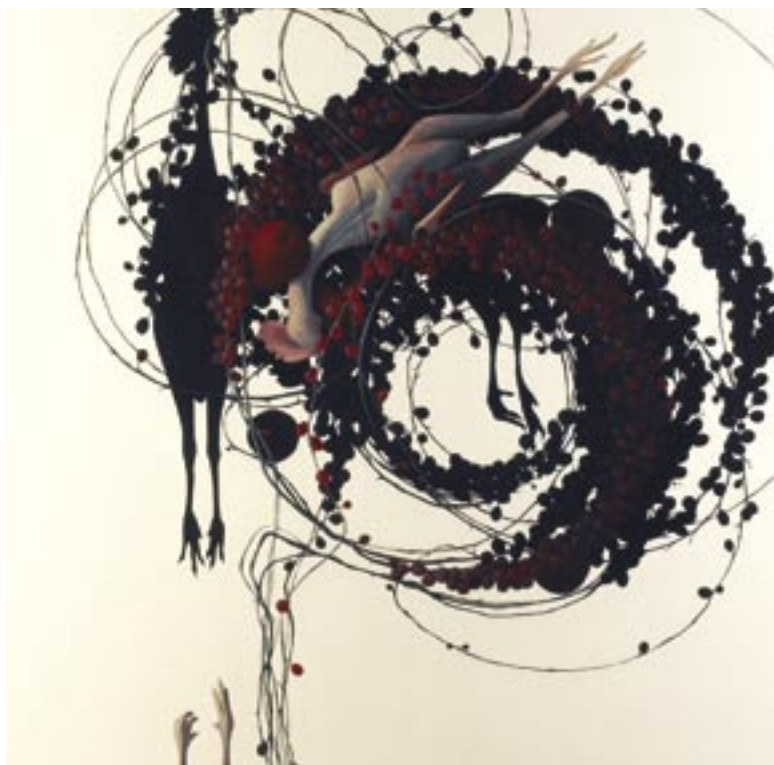
compositions bring into visual prominence what lies behind the life of the foods we eat—the genetic structures that carry the codes for all organic things, that bring them into being, program their ends, and determine their qualities. And that are now manipulated to produce foods without season, without blemish, and sometimes without taste.

There is something dreadful about the beauty of those chromosomal swirls. Their compositional harmony signals the power of what we are only beginning to decipher about the templates for life. The now famous double helix of DNA is usually merely notional: we know it is there, but it is so tiny that it falls beneath awareness. Brownell's pictures magnify it into huge nests that both sustain and trap, generate and control. The fusion of life and death in traditional memento mori painting here is transformed into a fusion of life and the genetic codes that bring it into being.

In some of these works, grapes are strung along chromosomal strands, as though the transition from gene to fruit were but an unfolding of nature. That nature has been manipulated by technology gradually dawns as one is drawn into the composition. Even more uneasy is her incorporation of animal forms into the swirls. In "Still Life with Chicken Villin Headpiece," for example, a plucked chicken arches voluptuously within the DNA that shaped it for the table. It has a seductive and almost obscene look, rather like the nakedly plucked fowls of Felice Boselli or Chaim Soutine.

Brownell returns us to something that much contemporary painting deliberately eschews: figural verisimilitude and beauty. Her pictures are visually captivating. As we examine them, the sheer machinery of nature comes to mind. But so do the manipulations of the genetic biologist and the drives of agricultural markets—revealing disturbing depths in the loveliest of pictures.

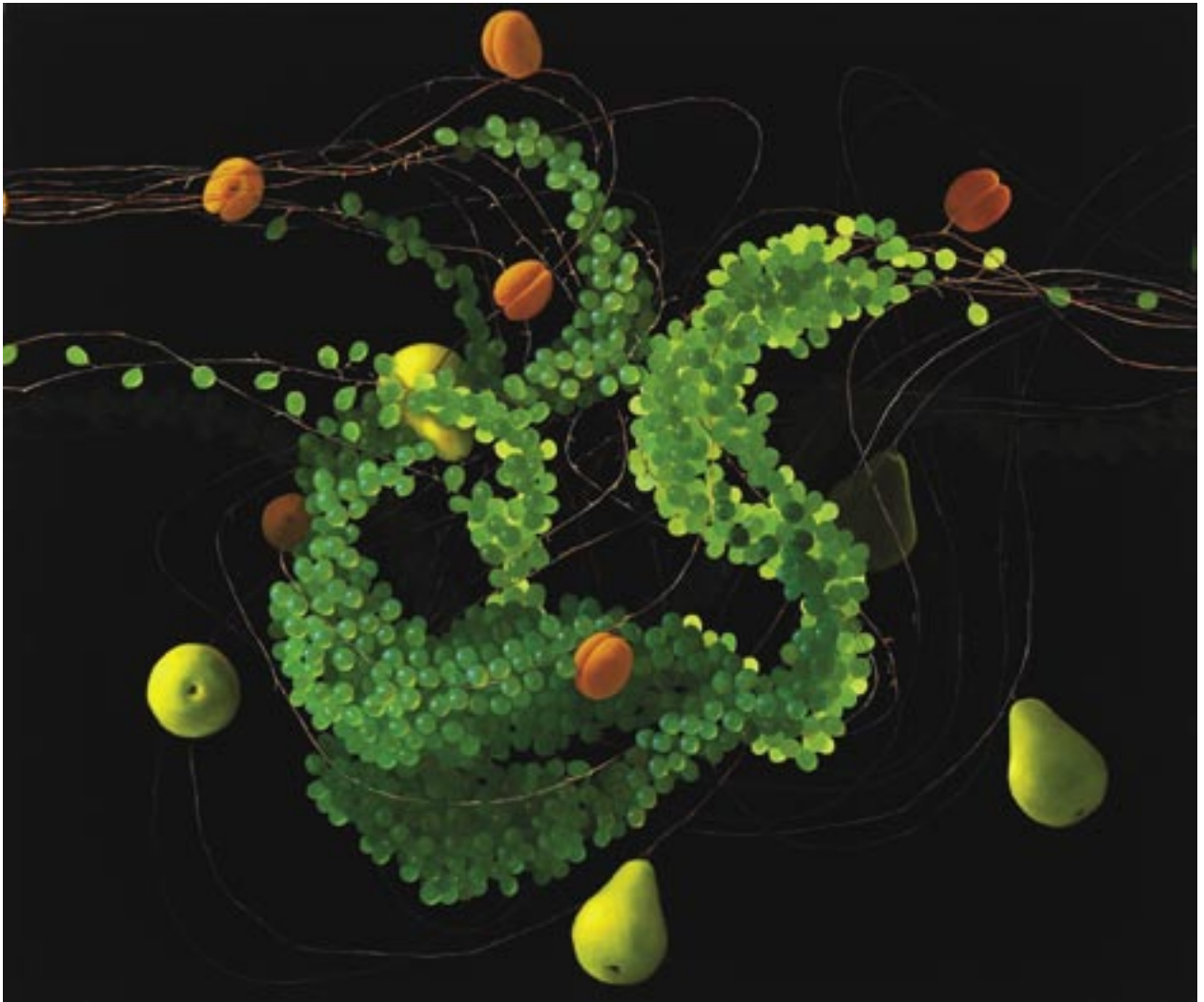
**Carolyn Korsmeyer**  
**Professor of Philosophy**  
**State University of New York, Buffalo**



This page: *Still Life with Chicken Villin Headpiece*, 2006. Oil on Canvas, 40x40 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Previous page: *Still Life with Grapes*, 2001. Oil on Canvas, 42x36 inches. Collection Lisa and Daniel Dubin, New York, NY.





*Still Life with Pear, Apricot and Grape III*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 30x36 inches.  
Collection Antoinette Segreto, Edgewater, NJ; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.



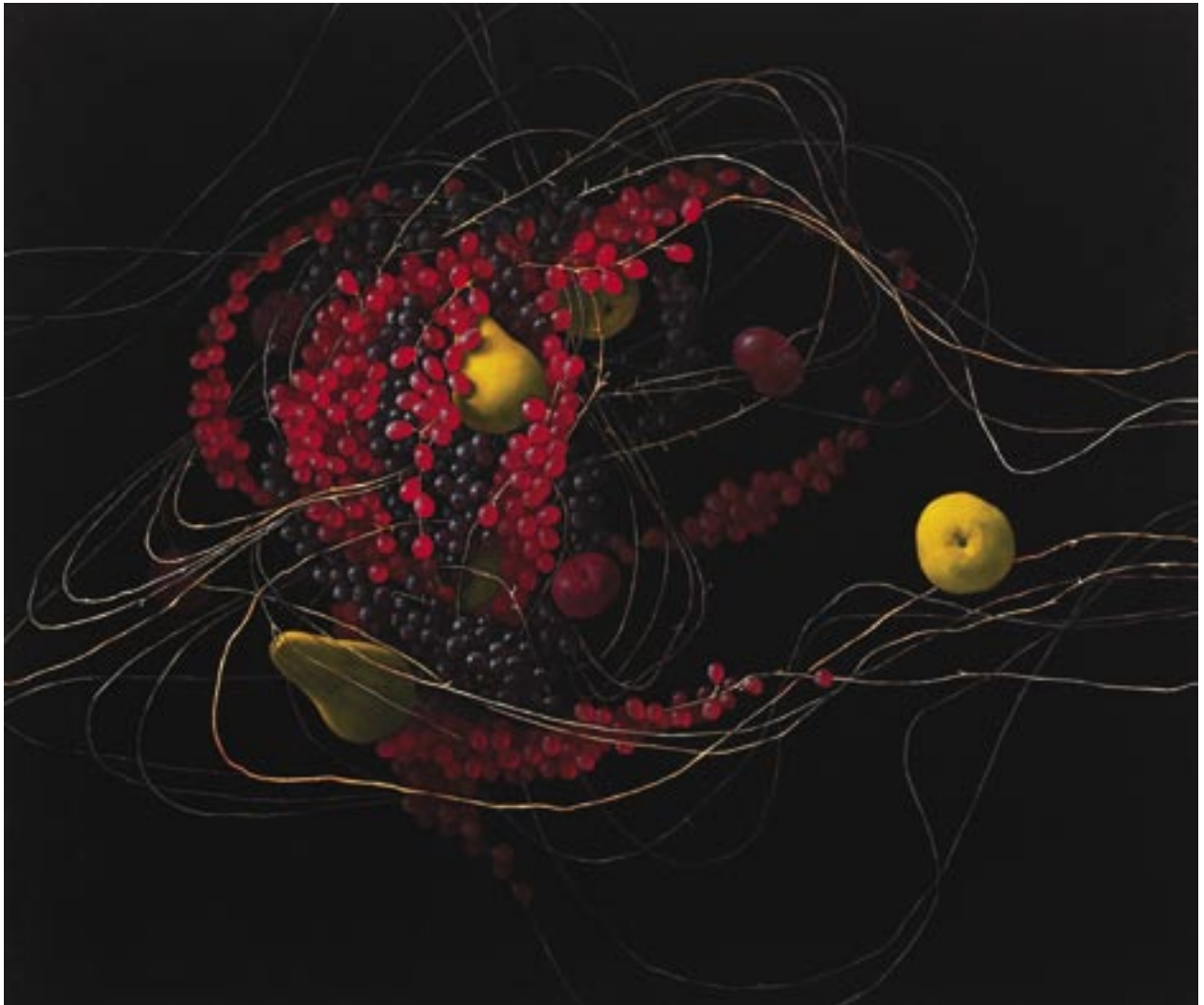


### Ambiguous Nature: Mia Brownell's Paintings

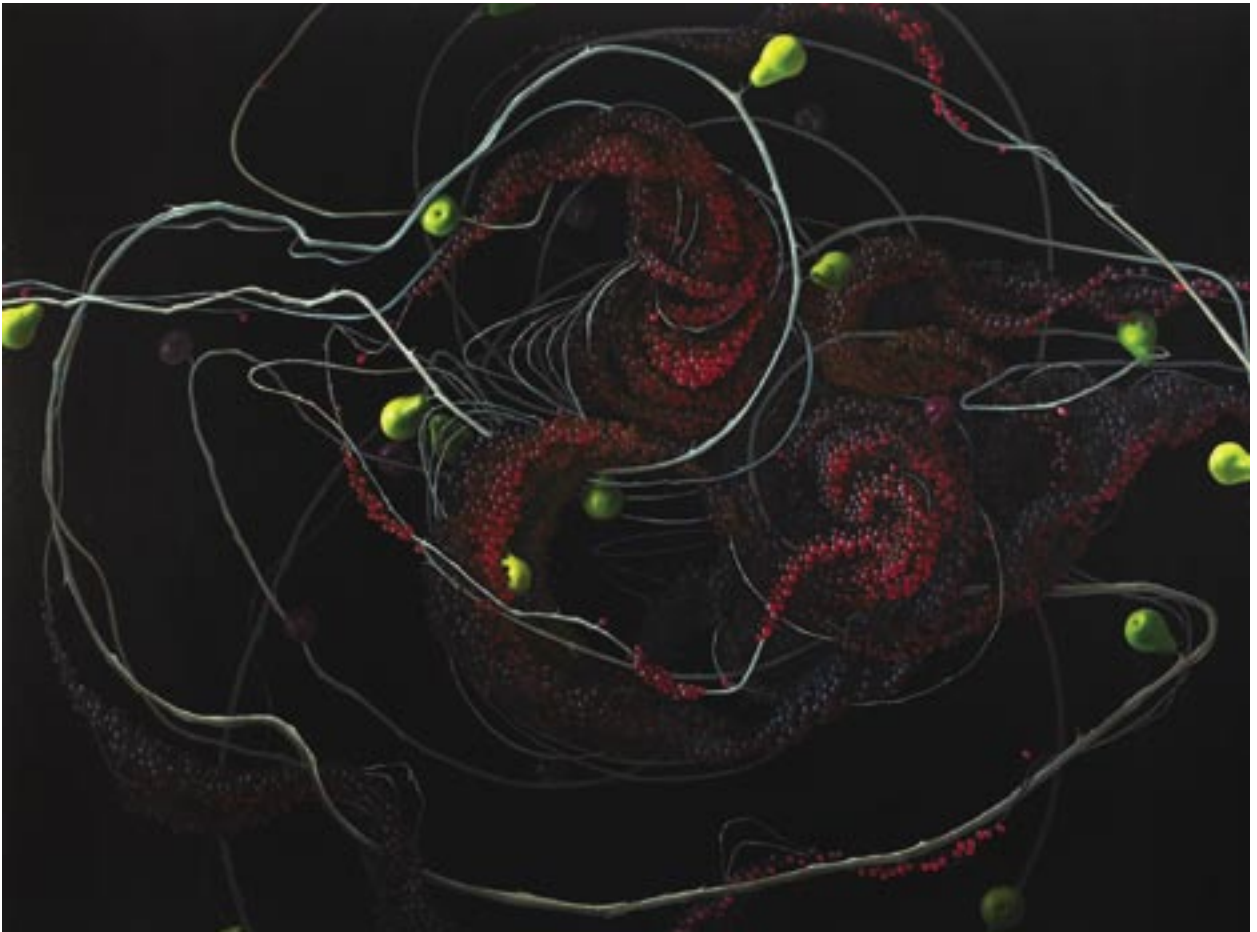
The question that haunts Mia Brownell's still lives of fruit—usually many intertwined vines of ripe grapes, from which larger fruit, usually pears or plums or both, dangle—is whether they're based on observation of nature or observation of art. Brownell describes visiting a supermarket and being “transported to a unique place without seasons”—I think “transported” has to be understood in both senses of the term—when she views the Eden of organic life on the fruit counters. On the other hand, she acknowledges a debt to Dutch Old Master still lives of fruit. Thus she stands between the supermarket and the museum—in the commercial cornucopia of modern America and in the grand tradition of Old Master still life. In the supermarket, the fruit of life is on sale, in the museum it has been sanctified by art. Are Brownell's lush images emblems of profane or sacred love—the instant gratification that can be had by eating food (she admits a fascination with “American attitudes towards food as a commodity,” suggesting that she means her paintings to be ironical social comments) or the reflective pleasure that comes from contemplating symbols of eternal life, which is what fruit has been since humankind first began eating it? Do her paintings put us in the artificial paradise of commodity culture or the artificial paradise of art, as Baudelaire called it?

There's something of both in Brownell's wonder-filled images, but I think the balance tilts towards the artificial paradise of art and the sacred. Her technique is traditional, but perhaps more importantly her paintings are icons in all but name: her fruit is a sort of sacred figure permanently suspended in space—a groundless figure in space absolutized by being flattened into a black or white plane, and thus abstract and sublime, that is, immeasurable and as such suggestive of an otherworldly realm. An earthly being suspended in transcendental space—it is a visionary device that recurs regularly in Old Master art, particularly in portraits meant to immortalize a figure without denying its vulnerability and





*Still Life with Pear, Plum and Grape VII*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 30x36 inches.  
Collection Sebastian Heath, New York, NY; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.



*Still Life with Villin Headpiece*, 2006. Oil on Canvas, 72x96 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

mortality. Curiously, Brownell's still lifes have the aura of traditional portraits: she seems to pose her fruit as though they were grand personages, bringing out their individuality and emotional tone—inner life—with her respectful handling. Like the Spanish bodegones, her still lifes are sacramental offerings of the first fruit of life, lovingly portrayed so that it will be memorable.

Brownell's fruit is also ornamental: its serpentine twistings—sometimes meandering with Byzantine intricacy, sometimes twisted together as though in a Gordian knot (both types have a labyrinthine look)—can be traced back to ancient ornament. Wilhelm Worringer notes the interplay of the purely abstract and naturalistic representation in ornament, giving it a certain “metaphysical” import: Brownell's ornamental devices—for me they are reminiscent of those Dürer made for the margins of the Emperor Maximilian's Prayerbook—have this metaphysical quality. Worringer thought it was particularly Northern European, which accords with Brownell's use of Dutch realism, which often has an oddly “meta-real” or ultra-real look. Versions of ornamental fruit—so-called decorative swags of fruit (they seem to be unravelling in some of Brownell's paintings, so that we seem to be entangled in them)—ornamental Roman sarcophagi, and serpentine movement famously appears in the intertwined snakes that dialectically converge in the caduceus. Both lush swags and wise serpents are age-old assertions of life and healing, and thus transcendence of death. The fact that the archetypal shape is that of DNA confirms that it represents life, just as the display of heaps of fruit is a traditional symbol of abundance.

I am suggesting that Brownell's paintings resonate with Old Master allusions—a traditional iconographic and stylistic richness that adds to their depth and meaningfulness—and metaphysical import. But they are also abstract, indeed, I venture to say a sort of Abstract Expressionism, for each grape functions as an idiosyncratic gesture, and the linear vines epitomize the all-over movement—relentless dynamic—that informs the most thoroughly expressionistic abstract painting. Brownell has invented a unique, convincing way to synthesize Old Master realism and Modern Master abstraction—and make a metaphysical as well as social point by doing so. Both have become historical, academic, and even decadent, but the artistic future belongs to those who can find innovative ways of integrating them, so that each revitalizes the other. It is the postmodern task, as many critics and theorists have argued. Brownell is one of the few young artists who intuitively understands this, which is why her paintings—at once crisp and poignant—give one hope for the future of art, all the more so because they show that painting is far from dead, and perhaps even more importantly that beauty is still possible in art, and can still be discovered in nature. Indeed, Brownell reminds us that it is innate to natural form if not to art, which is why *ars pictura natura* remains Brownell's motto, however much our understanding of nature has changed since antiquity—however much we have understood the basic abstract form of flourishing organic life, a flourishing form that Brownell's art rapturously represents, even worships.



**Donald Kuspit**  
Professor of Art History and Philosophy  
State University of New York, Stony Brook

This page: *Still Life with Pear and Grape*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 34x30 inches. Private collection, New York, NY; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.

Previous page: Detail: *Still Life with Villin Headpiece*, 2006. Oil on Canvas, 72x96 inches. Courtesy of the artist.







*Still Life with Pear and Grape VII*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 54x64 inches.  
Private collection, Carteret, NJ; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.



*Still Life with Flu*, 2006. Oil on Canvas, 56x50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



*Still Life with Double Double*, 2006. Oil on Canvas, 72x54 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



*Still Life with Pear, Plum and Grape III*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 54x64 inches.  
Collection Joyce and Richard Rand, Ithaca, NY.

## Essayists

**Kenneth Bendiner** was born in New York in 1947, received his BA in 1969 from the University of Michigan, and his PhD from Columbia University in 1979. He is the author of *Food in Painting from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004). He has also published three books on English Victorian art, and articles in various journals on Whistler, Manet, Matisse, De Chirico, Rauschenberg, and other 19th- and 20th-century artists. Bendiner is professor of art history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he has taught since 1985.

**Carolyn Korsmeyer's** chief research areas are aesthetics and emotion theory. She is presently at work on a study of disgust as an aesthetic response. Her book *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (1999) explores the neglected gustatory sense of taste and its claims for aesthetic status. She also works in the area of feminist philosophy, and her recent book on this subject is *Gender in Aesthetics: A Guide to Feminism and Philosophy of Art*. Korsmeyer is a Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

**Donald Kuspit** is an art critic and a professor of art history and philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He has been awarded fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Fulbright Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation, among others. Kuspit has written more than twenty books, including *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries* (Allworth Press), *Daniel Brush*, *Joseph Raffael*, *Chihuly*, and *Idiosyncratic Identities: Artists at the End of the Avant-Garde*. He lives in New York City.







*Still Life with Pear and Grape V*, 2005. Oil on Canvas, 30x40 inches.  
Private collection, New York, NY; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.

Extra special thanks to Martin Kruck and the Brownell Family: Isaac, Aaron, Nancy and Bill.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Mia Brownell was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1971 to a sculptor and biophysicist. She is an associate professor of art at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Connecticut. Mia lives and works in New Rochelle, New York.

## EDUCATION

1995 Master of Fine Arts, State University of New York University at Buffalo

1993 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Minor in Ethics, Carnegie Mellon University

### Studied

Parsons School of Design  
Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts  
The American University of Paris  
Maryland Institute, College of Art

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

### 2007

National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC  
Judy Ann Goldman Fine Art, Boston, MA

### 2006

Big Orbit Gallery, Buffalo, NY

### 2005

Metaphor Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, NY

### 2003

Duke University Brown Gallery, Durham, NC

### 1998

Castellani Art Museum, Niagara Falls, NY

### 1995

Big Orbit Gallery, Buffalo, NY

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

### 2006

YEA! (Young Emerging Artists), Westchester Arts Council, Arts Exchange Gallery, White Plains, NY

Modern Edens: *Permutations of Paradise*, Spur Projects, Portola Valley, CA

*Survive/Thrive/Alive*, Wave Hill Glynodor Gallery, Bronx, NY

SCSU Women in the Arts, Lyman Center Gallery, New Haven, CT

Scope New York, Art Fair, New York, NY. Presented by Metaphor Contemporary Art

Seven, Rockland Center for the Arts, West Nyack, NY

### 2005

*Caspar David Séance*, Jack the Pelican Presents, Brooklyn, NY

*Synthesis and Distribution: Experiments in Collaboration*, Pace University Gallery, New York, NY

*Reality Show*, Kenise Barns Fine Art, Larchmont, NY

*Faculty Show*, Kehler Liddell Gallery, New Haven, CT

Scope Hamptons, Art Fair, Southampton, NY. Presented by Jack the Pelican Presents

*Flash Art Fair*, International Fair of Contemporary Art, Milan, Italy. Presented by Jack the Pelican Presents

Art Chicago, International Fair of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL. Presented by Jack the Pelican Presents

*She Blinded Me With Science*, Gallery 138, New York, NY

### 2004

*Breathing Space*, Metaphor Contemporary Art, Brooklyn, NY

Media Loft Gallery, New Rochelle, NY

*Faculty Exhibition*, Kehler Liddell Gallery, New Haven, CT

*Shifting Affinities*, Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT

*Second Nature*, Fish Tank Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

*Fabrication*, Bruce Gallery, Edinboro University, Edinboro, PA

### 2003

Samson Fine Arts, New York, NY

*Faculty Plus*, Southeast Louisiana University

*Flat File Exhibition*, Artspace, New Haven, CT

### 2002

*Claiming the Spirit*, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA

*Food*, Greene County Council on the Arts, Catskill, NY

*Works on Paper*, ArtSpace, New Haven, CT

*The Nature of Things*, Gallery 138, New York, NY

*Symbolology*, Times Square Lobby Gallery, New York, NY

*Insight/OnSight*, Untitled (Space) Gallery, New Haven, CT

*Big Orbit ten years of spin*, Anderson Gallery, Buffalo, NY

*Works on Paper*, The Park Avenue Armory, New York, NY

Presented by Samson Fine Art

Zg Gallery, Zg Gallery, Chicago, IL

*Planet Earth*, New Gallery at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL

*Holding Pattern*, Grimshaw-Gudewicz Art Gallery, Fall River, MA

### 2001

*Reflections*, NCC Gallery, Norwalk, CT

*Drawing Today*, Arons Art Gallery, Hamden, CT

*Drawing National*, Montgomery College, Rockville, MD

*Final Thoughts*, Gallery in the Wood, South Windsor, CT

*Grrrls*, Untitled (Space) Gallery, New Haven, CT

*Third National*, Studio 4 West Gallery, Piermont, NY

*Environmental Injustices*, Gallery of Social/Political Art, Boston, MA

### 2000

*Untitled (space) opens the flatfile*, Untitled (space), New Haven, CT

*Unknown Generation X*, Danforth Gallery, The Maine Artists Space, ME

*4 x 4: 4 Mediums by 4 Artists*, Chautauqua Center for the Visual Arts.

*Fabulous Food*, NCCC Gallery, Norwalk Community College,

Norwalk, CT

*By the Palette*, For the Palate, Nash Gallery at the University of Minnesota

*Alumni Show*, Alcazar Gallery, Baltimore School for the Arts

*Culture of Class: Issues of Class in North American Culture*,

Decker Gallery at the Maryland Institute,

College of Art, Baltimore, MD

### 1999

*Fire & Ice: Nature and Technology*, Attleboro Museum, MA

*Tackling Meaning*, The Curator's Playbook, Red Chair Gallery, Kansas

*Illusions*, Kleist Center of Art and Drama, Cleveland, OH

*Apocalypse*, Williamsburg Art & Historical Center, Brooklyn, NY

*American Sentences*, Sponsored Reality, Union City, NJ

*Skills in Life*, Appleton Art Center, Appleton, Wisconsin

*The Feast*, Fine Art Celebrating Food, Gallery in the Wood, South Windsor, CT

*You are what you eat*, Paramount Center for the Arts, Peekskill, NY

### 1998

*Constant Cravings*, Constance Lindolm Fine Art, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

*Art for Environmental Advocacy*, Adell McMillan Gallery at the University of Oregon

*The Inanimate: 12 Artists on Still Life*, Burchfield-Penney Art Center at Buffalo State College

### 1997

*Biohazard*, Walter/McBean Gallery at the San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA

*Remix*, MMC Gallery, Marymount Manhattan Col., New York, NY

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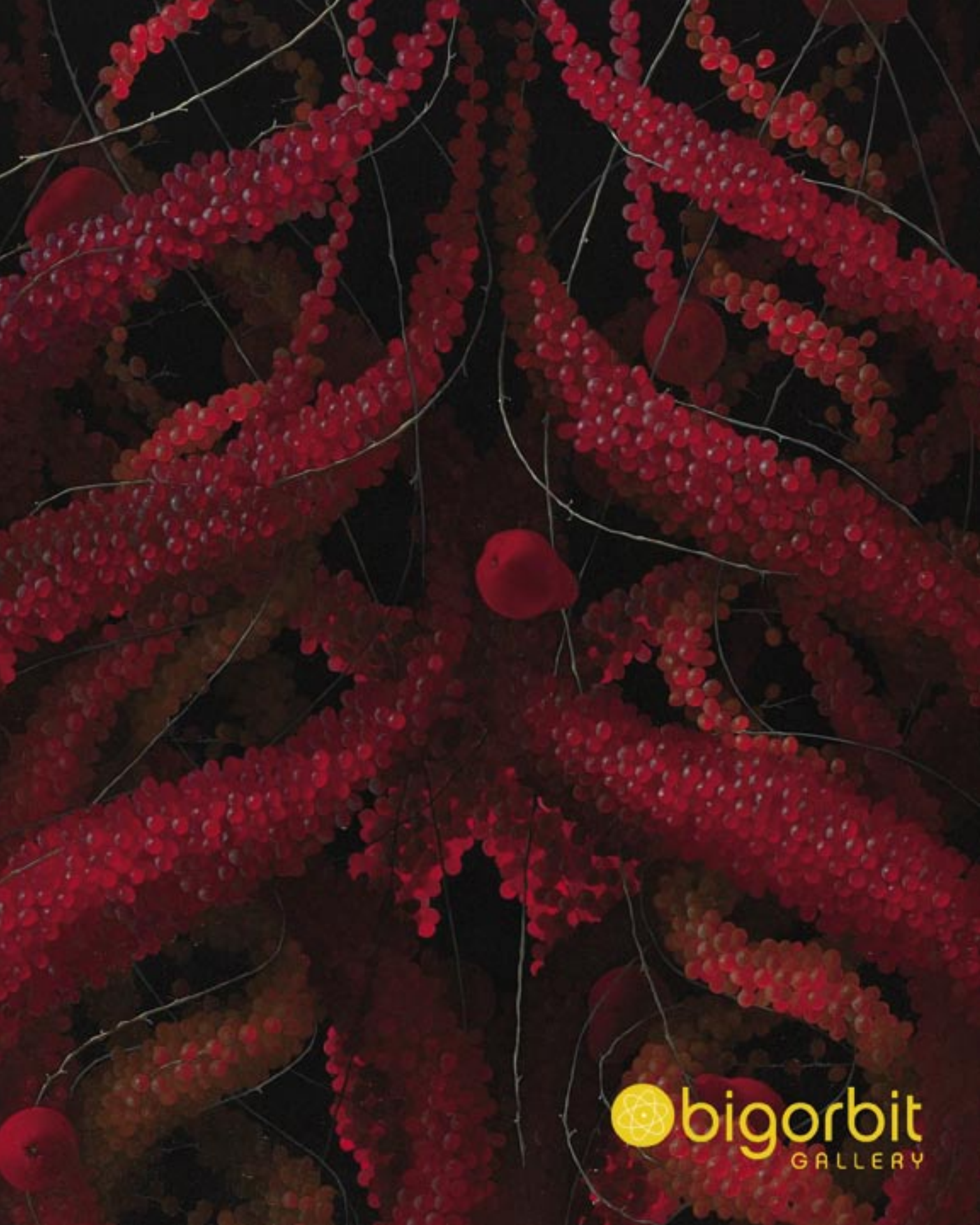
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Inside cover: Still Life with Pear, Plum and Grape II, 2005. Oil on canvas, 32x42 inches. Private collection, New York, NY; courtesy of Metaphor Contemporary Art, New York.

Back cover: Detail, *Still Life with Double Double*, 2006. Oil on Canvas, 72x54 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



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