



The Paintings of Mia Brownell

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I'm not into agriculture or gardening,
but in every supermarket I visit, wherever I go in the United States,
I am transported to a unique place without seasons.

Walls and pyramids of perfectly lit produce stop time and quote biblical notions of Eden.
The whole concept of not having a winter is a little absurd, no matter how amazing it looks.
The synthesis of these natural and artificial states creates ambiguity that I find captivating.

American attitudes toward food as a commodity fascinate me.
My paintings embrace a fusion of traditional still-life techniques and scientific models of proteins,
sublimated by notions of American dyspepsia.



Still Life with Double Double 2006 oil on canvas 72 x 54 inches



Still Life with Pear and Grape VII oil on canvas 54 x 64 inches



Still Life with Sympathy for Eve (Prelude), 2007. oil on canvas. 30 x 48 inches

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



Still Life with Two Pears, 2008. oil on Canvas. 36 x 48 inches

biologist and the drives of agricultural markets— revealing disturbing depths in the loveliest of pictures.

Mia Brownell was born in Chicago, Illinois to a sculptor and biophysicist. She has had solo exhibitions in major American cities including New York, Boston and Washington, DC. Mia's paintings are in several private, corporate, and public art collections including Wellington Management, Fidelity Investments and the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC. Her work has been reviewed by The New York Times, Boston Globe, Washingtonian Magazine, New Haven Advocate, New Haven Register, Hartford Courant, Southern Life, Yale Daily News, The Buffalo News, Art Voice, The Spectrum, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Journal News, Westchester Arts Council Journal, Antiques and The Arts Weekly, Garden Design, The Portland Phoenix, The Chautauquan Daily and the San Francisco Weekly. Her artwork has been featured in *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, *Chicago Art Journal* and *Issues in Science and Technology*. A graduate of Carnegie Mellon

(BFA 1993) and State University of New York, Buffalo (MFA 1995), Mia has been teaching painting and drawing since 1993. She has held a tenured faculty position at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven since 2003. She was recently awarded the 2007 Southern Connecticut State University's Faculty Scholar Award and promoted to Full Professor.