

Ambiguous Nature: Mia Brownell's Paintings
by Donald Kuspit

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 mortality. Curiously, Brownell's still lives 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 lives 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)--ornament 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.

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