

T INTRODUCES

A Painter Who Embraces Blank Space

Brenda Draney's exuberant artworks are only selectively revealing.

By Rose Courteau

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[T Introduces](#) highlights a singular debut.



The painter Brenda Draney, photographed at her studio in Edmonton, Alberta, on June 26, 2025. On the wall behind her are several works in progress. Amber Bracken

Growing up in Slave Lake, Alberta — a tiny Canadian town about 150 miles northwest of Edmonton — the artist Brenda Draney was considered “too talkative, too noisy, too something,” she says. Perhaps that’s why her paintings are often remarkable for what they don’t express. Her 2009 work “[Aim Is Important](#),” for example, depicts a bespectacled man on the left side of a 48-by-52-inch canvas aiming a dart at a board in the top right corner, his target seeming to float on the mostly blank expanse. All that negative space, she says, invites viewers to layer on their own associations.



Paintings in progress in Draney's studio. Amber Bracken

Draney, 49, started drawing as a child in order to create “another reality for myself,” she says. Her father was a machinist and her mother — who is Cree and a member of the Sawridge First Nation, and who was taken from her own parents at a young age as part of Canada’s ignominious assimilation initiatives — held jobs at a bus depot and a hotel. (The two divorced when Draney and her older sister were young.) After finishing high school, Draney was working at a gas station when a friend recommended that she apply for a college scholarship available to Indigenous students. She enrolled at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, where she earned a degree in literature before pursuing a fine arts diploma at the encouragement of one of her professors, the poet E.D. Blodgett.

“Aim Is Important,” which she painted while earning her master’s in applied arts from Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, established Draney’s career, winning the Royal Bank of Canada’s painting competition in 2009 and leading to shows in her home country and abroad. Her first New York solo exhibition, entitled “Brenda Draney: Out of the Woods,” opens next month at TriBeCa’s [Ortuzar gallery](#), where it will be on view through Nov. 1. Alongside color-drenched domestic tableaus and figurative works done in her signature light, quick brushstrokes will be several pieces inspired by the Witiko, a cannibalistic monster from Cree folklore that, Draney says, represents “a person who’s lost their humanity.” She was drawn to the idea after her three-decade relationship fell apart a few years ago, prompting her to contemplate the way that gradual change can ultimately render even those closest to us unrecognizable. Like Bigfoot or the Abominable Snowman, the Witiko, she says, is defined by its absence: “We see their aftermath, but we never see them.”