

Rebecca Brewer

One of several young Vancouver painters to come to prominence during the past decade, Rebecca Brewer has contributed to the medium's resurgence in the city after decades in the shadows of photo-conceptualism. Since 2007, Brewer has developed a unique language, part abstraction and part figuration, inspired as much by local practices as international influences. Her attention to some of the city's long-term histories, and the largely unbroken trajectory of abstract painting on the West Coast, beginning with Emily Carr, have provided fertile ground for her practice.

Brewer develops her compositions intuitively, working primarily in oil and often beginning with an initial set of arbitrary marks. Her recent paintings often feature a single, partially defined figure against an abstract or loosely patterned background; an earth-tone palette; and a gestural, skittering mark-making that together call up a range of art-historical precedents from the fragmentation and tonality of analytic cubism to the cartoonish figures of Philip Guston. In *Beuys Painting* (2010) for example – a work that won her a major national painting award – formal ambiguity is underscored by the specificity of the figure's pose, seeming to recall a capped and cloaked Beuys during his 1974 New York City performance with a coyote. In fact, much of Brewer's work mines the depths of the twentieth-century Western canon, merrily and voraciously pinballing allusions to Mary Heilmann, Milton Avery, Matisse and Silke-Otto Knapp.

Brewer belongs to a loose group of painters (including Nicole Ondre, Eli Bornowsky and Monique Mouton, among

others) who studied at Emily Carr University principally under Elizabeth McIntosh and Neil Campbell, both abstractionists from under whose tutelage much of Vancouver's new painting talent has emerged. McIntosh and Campbell have themselves built on the history of abstraction on the West Coast, which begins with Carr's fauvist landscapes and moves successively through a series of local artists who bridge the abstract and figurative divide, including Jack Shadbolt during the 1950s, Roy Kiyooka and Michael Morris in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the likes of Mina Totino, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Derek Root and Attila Richard Lukacs through the 1980s and into the 1990s.

Brewer's latest works narrow their focus on figure/ground relationships even further. Her *Beuys* painting prefigures a cycle of works shown together in her solo exhibition 'Nine Paintings of Ayn Rand' (2012) that employ a stylized, art-deco figure reminiscent of the famous covers of *Atlas Shrugged* (designed by Rand's husband) as a kind of leitmotif. The titles of these works – *The Improviser*, *The Economist*, *The Luddite* – seem to convey Randian archetypes, yet any strong affinity (or argument) with the controversial objectivist philosopher is left for the viewer to speculate. Perhaps due to the vagueness of her theme, Brewer's genuine talent emerges quite clearly, and the tension between ambiguity and historical specificity is, at least in this case, allowed to fade into the background as a simple armature for an astonishing compositional and paint-handling capability, and the desire to push an image to the edge of recognition.



← *Beuys Painting*, 2010,
oil on panel, 107 × 119 cm

↑ *The Improviser*, 2012,
oil on panel, 91 × 107 cm

↗ *The Economist*, 2012,
oil on panel, 91 × 107 cm

→ *The Luddite*, 2012, wool felt,
gesso, acrylic, powdered
tempera, 130 × 160 cm

