

# FIGURES

Rebecca Brewer reactivates a tradition

BY **TATIANA MELLEMA**

In the past few years, there has been a reconsideration of painting in Vancouver. A number of exhibitions, talks and events have brought it new attention. Rebecca Brewer is among a younger generation of artists playing a prominent role in engaging painting in an expanded dialogue. Yet Brewer has always looked outside of Canada while working alongside her Vancouver peers. Her paintings have been well received by critics in a short amount of time: she won the 2011 RBC Canadian Painting Competition and joined highly respected gallery Catriona Jeffries in 2013. By bridging the gap between painting and conceptual art and widening the scope of figuration, Brewer is breathing new life into the Vancouver scene.

Brewer studied sculpture and painting at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, where she took classes with artist Elizabeth McIntosh. During her 10-year teaching career, McIntosh has explored conventions of abstraction in painting, and has brought a critical awareness of painting practices outside Canada to her classes. Brewer recalls first learning about the works of artists such as Peter Doig and Daniel Richter there, and McIntosh's assignments have left an indelible mark on her practice in relation to how style is born and how content is integrated with form.

In 2008, a year after graduating from Emily Carr, Brewer was an artist-in-residence at the Banff Centre, where she took part in the thematic residency *Figure in a Mountain Landscape*, led by German artist Silke Otto-Knapp. Otto-Knapp, known for paintings that feature performance, landscape and cultural histories, was conducting a residency with the

Rebecca Brewer in her  
Vancouver studio, October  
2014. PHOTO JIMMY JEONG











aim of focusing on experimental processes and conceptual approaches for artists given to *plein-air* painting. Colleagues at the time recognized Brewer for her intriguing explorations of figuration. The paintings, which included flat grounds and centralized, almost-mythological figures, broached themes of Romanticism and the sublime. Support for the work at the residency propelled her to enroll in the MFA program at Bard College in upstate New York in 2010.

At Bard, Brewer was quickly immersed in the New York art world and worked hard to keep up with the pace of the program. In her first year, she had 39 studio visits, and her visitors' astute readings of her work led her to build confidence in her practice. During this time, Brewer was exploring varieties of painterly abstraction. She was particularly interested in how a work of art can be ambiguous while inflecting meaning at the same time. With an impulse to dissolve forms, she would nonetheless try to hold certain things in mind, working through ways to build an image while allowing for a figure to emerge in the process. It was during this time that she made *Beuys painting*, a quasi-Cubist portrait of iconic German artist Joseph Beuys, which won the RBC competition in 2011.

In Vancouver, in 2012, she worked on new paintings for an exhibition at the project space Exercise, which was run by two recent graduates from Emily Carr: Nicole Ondre and Vanessa Disler. The gallery was located in an unmarked 300-square-foot storefront building on Main Street, and featured an exhibition space and studios for artists. For her exhibition at Exercise, Brewer drew on her explorations at Bard and pushed into new territory.

"Nine Paintings of Ayn Rand" included a series of panels that evoked a quasi-Cubist, art deco style. They also revealed an exploration into the cultural encoding of figures. The show was named after novelist Ayn Rand, whose philosophy of Objectivism held that rational and ethical egoism trumped altruism. Instead of looking at the philosophical implications, Brewer pulled from the cover illustrations of Rand's novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, each of which was decorated with a figure that was given an art deco treatment. Brewer wondered, "Why do we associate a particular style with a person?"

Brewer is fascinated with medieval portraiture and how figures such as saints have historically been represented through iconic features that bring to mind a whole personality along with the allegorical meanings associated with their lives. For centuries, these portraits have conveyed an entire religious philosophy through their characteristic representations. The paintings that were featured in the Exercise show are personages of a kind. The specific naming of the works, such as *The Economist*, *The Improviser* and *The Monastic Knight* (2012), casts light on abstract anthropomorphic forms and invites us to read human traits into painterly motifs that simultaneously blur a clear identification of the figures. With these works, Brewer explores categorical naming, turning figures that have emerged through the painting process into typologies. Looking back, Brewer believes that the works were perhaps too specific in their titles, but the process of concentrating on emergent figuration and naming proved important in helping her develop a process that has become more decisive in its ambiguity.

As she worked towards her spring 2014 exhibition at Catriona Jeffries, for which she had embarked on an entirely new series of work, Brewer was feeling pressure. Her process involves a painstaking level of detail work that develops from a continual revision of small segments of each painting. Starting with a specific colour, Brewer builds a substantial ground using paint on panel and allows this to determine the direction of the work. As shapes build and figures appear, she reworks segments of the panel as needed. Abstractions turn into shifting figures in landscapes and sometimes interiors. While the process is largely materially oriented and concerned with the formal qualities of painting, the marks and forms emerge out of Brewer's fascination with 20th-century figurative abstraction. Over the years, she has become comfortable with the plastic qualities of painting and no longer sees the need for them to be in the service of a prescriptive meaning.

Once the show was up, it was clear that Brewer's hard work had paid off—her paintings had developed into a cohesive body of work. The title of the show was "The Written Face," and on the gallery's press release there was an image of a woman taken from a Moon tarot card. For this exhibition, Brewer relied on figurative research into historic tarot cards and their depictions of fragmented subjects that contain symbolic objects. The tarot's



Installation view of **Rebecca Brewer's** "The Written Face" at Catriona Jeffries, 2014  
PHOTO SCOTT MASSEY

OPPOSITE **Rebecca Brewer**  
*Beuys painting* 2010 Oil on panel 106.7 cm x 1.19 m  
IMAGES OF ARTWORKS COURTESY CATRIONA JEFFRIES



Installation view of  
Rebecca Brewer's "Nine  
Paintings of Ayn Rand"  
at Exercise, 2009 PHOTO  
GRAHAM DALIK



message is largely determined by the reader when the card is flipped over.

This consideration of the tarot can be taken as a sub-theme of the exhibition. The works explore borders between inside and outside that have long been unstable. Pictures have always required someone to ascribe meaning to them. On first look at the panels, entire swaths of art-historical motifs are evoked. But rather than merely referencing historical works, Brewer is using formal processes that explore her own conceptual concerns.

One of the first works encountered in "The Written Face" was *The Beatnik* (2013), a sunny—yet at the same time dark—image of what seems to be a man taking cover from the hot sun under a storefront. The figure is staged in an unnatural light, and the vibrant yellow-and-orange ground is strangely luminescent, altering the varying shades of muddy blues, purples, greens and blacks elsewhere in the work. In the series of paintings, Brewer's figures are now dissolved into the ground and often built with fragmented layers of impasto that complicate any decisive reading of subject and form. It is as if the interior life of the subject is now extrapolated as part of the painting's ground. Portrait and ground are simultaneous. As viewers identify with the painting as a quasi-subject, perceptions are nonetheless precarious and they generate multiple readings of the work. While Brewer was making *The Beatnik*, she was thinking about Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys and his well-documented psychological battles.

The painting's slippage of interior and exterior worlds and unravelling layers of darkness and light can be said to play out the pathos of Wilson's private journey.

In a text written for the exhibition, painter and printmaker Eli Bornowsky describes Brewer's practice as a psychedelic engagement. One can experience the work as time travel through a history of painterly motifs. This is certainly true of *Blue envelope* (2014), whose angular Cubist forms, compression of space akin to traditional Japanese and Chinese landscapes and colours evocative of Monet's *Water Lilies* are layered with the mythical apparitions and romantic vistas of the Symbolist movement. In the painting, Brewer cites Odilon Redon with the various flowers that decorate the work. Foliage proves to be of interest in other works too, as in *Moon card* (2014), which depicts a moon-lit botanical garden with a range of greens and vertical forms that evoke an entire history of landscape painting.

In *The Screens* (2014), Brewer plays on the motif of interior and exterior space. Situated in what appears to be a room interior, vibrant and patterned layers of paint evoke screened room dividers and 20th-century paisley and floral-print fabrics. Here she channels Pierre Bonnard and his intimate, luxurious interiors, as well as the still-life works of Giorgio Morandi with their tonal subtlety and reduction of objects into compositional elements.

It aligns too with iconic representations of artists' workspaces, in particular Henri Matisse's *The Red Studio* (1911), where simplified forms and flat perspective against a vibrant ground allow each element of the room to play an integral part in the painting. While a cat appears to be the solitary figure in *The Screens*, this piece in fact represents a stage set, screens dividing and obscuring our view of the painterly space, while suggesting the presence of an out-of-sight figure. We become entangled in traces of presence.

We find ourselves inscribed in Brewer's work, and recognize our role as producers of meaning. Through subtle markings, we conjure the motifs that Brewer implies. As art historian Isabelle Graw explains, "...it is subjectivity that designates a subject"—the high-modernist ideal of art as transcending subjectivity having been long refuted. Brewer's dismantling of figures engages the formal qualities of painting, but it simultaneously invites us to unpack layers of reference as we immerse ourselves in the work and reflect on our own perceptions. Our subjectivity is teased and uncovered as dictated by familiar narratives that allow us to project meaning onto unstable marks and spaces.

While Brewer's works expand and distort painterly conventions, it is important to remember that she looks to her historical antecedents with genuine interest and respect. "I wanted to study history," she explains. And she does. ■