

The Art of Simultaneity

Vanessa Brown's Unlikely Combinations

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The Vancouver-based artist Vanessa Brown works in the wonderful world of contradictions and illusions. Like a poet, a jeweller, a stage designer, a couturier, her art centres on the accessories; present in it is a spiritual, feminist tribute to accessories. Her art is there, and not there. Active in the negative spaces, she traces the outlines of shapes in metalwork and other materials. It is airy art made with heavy materials. It looks lightweight but is dense, solid, sturdy. It is strong, fragile, resilient and delicate—minimal but busy. It is sculpture about painting, line art made of welded metal. It is highly discursive without having anything definitive to say. These are metaphorical and empathetic objects and yet they remain totally elusive. Brown's art is not the middle paragraphs of an essay or the conjoined recursive quotes from postmodern homage.

There are reference points, but her art is not the machine parts for conceptual theory-making engines. It is completely beguiling and mysterious yet open and gregarious in its own kind of sublimely silent conversation. It might even seem that Vanessa Brown's visual art talks and listens. When looking at it I'm reminded of what Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña once wrote: "An object is not an object; it is a witness to a relationship."



Vanessa Brown, *Ashtray Earrings*, 2018, steel, paint, 3.5 x 83 x 32 inches. From *Late Night Trip to the Jewellers*, 2018, The Esker Foundation, Calgary. © Vanessa Brown. Photo: John Dean. Images courtesy the artist and the Esker Foundation, Calgary.

Born in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1981 to Canadian parents and raised in Vancouver, BC, Vanessa Brown worked for many years in the hospital system as a care provider and social worker, exploring various creative outlets at the same time, including art and writing. I met her around 2006 or 2007, when she registered for a fiction workshop I taught one evening a week at University of British Columbia's Writing Centre. And in the years after that we often saw each other at art openings or around our shared neighbourhood of Strathcona. During these years she worked part-time as an artist's assistant and exhibition installer. It wasn't until I left the city and moved to Victoria that Brown chose to focus full-time on visual art, and over the next few years I followed her progress over social media—first on Facebook and then Instagram, where she maintains a tightly curated account of her own work and that of artists she admires or is working alongside. She received her bachelor's degree from Emily Carr University in 2013. While there, she studied with artist and teacher Richard Clements, who introduced her to wood- and metalworking, and it was out of those classes that Brown produced her first pieces in the style she now continues to employ. Immediately upon graduating, she received invitations to show. In the past four years, she has been included in over 25 group shows, and has had six solo shows, including at the Western Front and Wil Aballe Art Projects in Vancouver, the Esker Foundation in Calgary, Arsenal Project Space in Toronto and, most recently, Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran in Montreal, which

gave Brown a solo show in 2019, as well taking her work to this year's Armory Show in New York.



Stained Glass Earring + Stand, 2018, steel, stained glass, paint, copper foil, copper wire, 115 x 60 x 18.5 inches. From *Late Night Trip to the Jewellers*, 2018, The Esker Foundation, Calgary. © Vanessa Brown. Photo: John Dean.

Brown works in metal, welded and plasma-cut sheets, bent rods and pipes. She works in fabric, robes, shawls, yarn. Materials that could be inconsequential she makes monumental. What typically has grandeur is minimized. There is rigidity and pliability. Soft sculpture and sharp sculpture, her work is simultaneously both. *Late Night Break*, 2017, is a still life in cut steel painted a smoky, evening blue and features a wine bottle, cigarette and fruit. Her three-dimensional objects are sometimes thinner than two-dimensional art. Her sculptures are often flatter than canvases. Vanessa Brown creates opposites that attract, unlikely combinations. A sculpture of two giant ashtrays doubles as earrings. Two black sheath

nightgowns are from 2018—*Robe for Daydreaming* and *Robe for*

Sleepwalking. One has eye-shaped cut copper accessories hanging from the front pockets by earring hooks; the other is decorated with dried flowers. Flowers and plants are one preoccupation in Brown's artwork, earrings are another. These recurring motifs contribute an elusive mystical aspect, an allusive alchemy, in concordance with her predilection for rings, cigarettes, hooks, moon and lentil shapes, candles and dresses. Many of her works incorporate objects that look inspired by the separate pieces of a long-lost charm bracelet.

There is *Stained Glass Earring + Stand*, 2018, oversized earrings in shades of blue, pink and yellow stained glass hanging in the form of an abstract face with the earrings as the eyes, teardrops dripping down, in a style that echoes Paul Klee.

There is *The Greenhouse*, which appeared at the Esker Foundation in Calgary, AB, in 2018 as part of her show called "The Witching Hour." Here, unpainted sheets of brushed steel were cut into the shapes of plants and flowers hanging in pots along an unconventional armature forming a sculpture that echoes Alexander Calder's mobiles as much as Betty Woodman's ceramics.

Reverse Photosynthesis (Candleholder) from 2019 is a large P shape made of steel rods whose colours shift subtly like a sunrise from midnight blue through a lush green to a summer yellow. Two painterly daffodil-ish yellow flowers, which Brown likens to the kind found in a van Gogh painting, made of metal shaped with a plasma cutter, hang upside down from the bottom of the loop in the P, and a single beeswax candle burns at the top of the vertical column. The P shape might relate to the word "photosynthesis" or to the pliability of meaning itself.

One of Brown's most iconic works is *Ashtray Earrings*, 2018. They are the size of two coffee tables, with a giant filtered cigarette, also made of steel, resting on one. The ashtrays are also a set of giant, unwearable earrings. *Ashtray Earrings* appeared in her fall 2018 solo show, "Late Night Trip to the Jewellers," at the Esker Foundation and Arsenal Contemporary in Toronto.

The combination reminds me that both are accessories of a kind, both objects of style and fashion that carry their own aesthetic and history within fashion and culture. Earrings and cigarettes both draw attention to the face and both are objects of attraction. I've never smoked a cigarette, but I like to watch people smoke. I understand why it's a meditative act, a short leave of absence, a moment of reflection. Smoke is an amazing, mystical substance and a source of fascination for how it twists and turns, coils and stretches out, balloons and then disappears without a trace. Positing bad advice, "Everyone should be forced to smoke," the singer Joni Mitchell told her biographer, Michelle Mercer.



Installation view, *Late Night Trip to the Jewellers*, 2018, from "The Witching Hour," The Esker Foundation, Calgary. © Vanessa Brown. Photo: John Dean.

Brown's solo show at Wil Aballe Art Projects in 2016 was titled "The Hand of Camille," a reference to the artist Camille Claudel, who is often forgotten to art history, while her lover and collaborator, Auguste Rodin, remains a canonical

figure. And while there are no direct references to Claudel's work in Brown's pieces, the plaster sculpture of a hand holding flowers references the title of the show, which in turn refers explicitly to the sometimes overlooked artist. With this exhibition, Brown explores the relationship between her own interests as an artmaker and the position of women throughout art history. Virginia Woolf put it most succinctly in her 1929 book *A Room of One's Own* when she wrote, "I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman," a famous enough line that there's even an American award given annually to a woman artist named for this quote. Will this ever cease to be true? Progress, slow as it is, seems to suggest things have improved in the past hundred years more than they had in the previous thousand years of art history, where almost every artist's signature bears the name of a man. In a conversation we had over Skype, Vanessa Brown described for me how she sees that, throughout history, wealth is passed down through a patriarchal lineage, while heirlooms—the objects of life—are passed through the matrilineal line. Charm bracelets, vases, dresses, jewellery are all shared from mother to daughter. In the "hierarchy of arts," as Brown put it to me, the monumental is masculine, while the modest is feminine. The handiwork of art—craft—is a feminine essence, and the industrial-scale, factory-perfect product is seen as masculine. Brown plays with these notions, inverting and subverting them with the monumental ashtray earrings and the modestly sized mig-welded steel sculptures. When I think of her efforts to honour her foremothers, I'm also reminded of an interview the artist Louise Bourgeois did with a Yale University student named Alexis Rafael Krasilovsky in 1971, which was printed in *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father*, a book of Bourgeois's writings and interviews published in 1998. Krasilovsky asked her, "Do you see art as a man's world?" and Bourgeois answered, "Yes. It is a world where both men and women are trying to please men in power." Krasilovsky follows this up with the question, "Do you think there is a specific style or aspect of a style which women artists share?" Bourgeois answers, "Not yet. Before this takes place women will have to forget their desire to please the male power structure." This is a daunting prognosis to assess, but it is to be hoped that successive waves of feminism,

since this '70s interview, might have given some of this power to the women and charged them with a fresh sense of vision.

Marianne, 2017, is an ambitious set of five works on and around a low, slab-like white plinth. The eye is first drawn to the welded steel outline of a large tea infuser in the shape of a watering jug. Inside the infuser there is a plant hanging upside down from the lid, but upon a closer look, this sprig turns out to have leaves made of cut steel and a stem made from a steak knife. In front of this infuser is a small purple and blue shag rug. Half the rug is latch-hooked on the reverse side so that its stitching is exposed and the letters M and B are more visible. Small, silver, steel-cut moon shapes are scattered on the rug. Next to this rug is another ashtray, a large chair sized ashtray with a cigarette resting on it. Like the Ashtray Earrings that come after it, this ashtray in black steel is something else as well; it looks a lot like an artist's seat. Marianne is named for the Bauhaus artist Marianne Brandt, painter, collagist and renowned metalwork sculptor, and the first female student of László



The Greenhouse, 2018, steel and tulle, dimensions variable. Installation view, The Esker Foundation, Calgary. © Vanessa Brown. Photo: John Dean.

Moholy-Nagy. Her initial job was to hammer little moon shapes out of steel, like the ones that are spilled over this hooked rug. Brandt's later designs include the same objects Brown uses: ashtrays and tea infusers in the iconic Bauhaus style.

Marianne Brandt joins Camille Claudel as an artist-inspiration, a kind of creative grandmother

acknowledged by name in Brown's art practice. Brown's artwork pays tribute to a shared sensibility with these women—perhaps she's been able to forget what Bourgeois, back in 1971, hoped women artists would forget. Certainly,

you could eliminate all men from Brown's sphere and focus entirely on the influences of women artists— the impressionists Mary Cassat, Berthe Morisot, Meret Oppenheim, Eileen Agar, Louise Bourgeois, the Bauhaus women; and contemporary affiliations with the work of Cecilia Vicuña, Betty Woodman, Karen Kraven and, in Canada, Gabriel Beveridge, Nadia Belerique, Colleen Heslin, Luanne Martineau, Valerie Blass, Aganetha Dyck and many others. Vanessa Brown's incredible body of work so far is a promise of more, and of more names surfacing, from art's past, present and upcoming. When we reflect on the present day, though, the existential struggles we are faced with against a kind of retrograde power in ascendancy can be demoralizing, and environmental and economic emergencies can put in question our collective fortunes. What will tomorrow bring? But we can't wait for a better day; we must support each other now. In researching Camille Claudel on the Internet, I came across a quote attributed to her that struck a chord: "Send me a hundred francs on our future deals, otherwise I will disappear in a cataclysm."

Lee Henderson is a contributing editor to *Border Crossings*. His most recent novel, *The Road Narrows as You Go*, was published in 2014 by Hamish Hamilton.