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# From Semicartoonish to Simple Yet Subtle

Works by Joan Brown and Annette Lemieux, plus 'Life of Cats' at Japan Society

By **PETER PLAGENS**

April 10, 2015 5:26 p.m. ET

### Joan Brown: Major Paintings From the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s

George Adams

525-531 W. 26th St., (212) 564-8480

Through May 2

Joan Brown (1938-1990) was a prodigy in the “Bay Area Figurative style,” and “Portrait of a Chair” (1958), which serves as a kind of frontispiece to this exhibition, is a stunning example of someone mastering scale, composition, color and hell-for-leather brushwork at the tender age of 19. But Ms. Brown is best remembered for her semicartoonish but still seriously expressionist paintings made from the late 1960s until her death in a freak construction accident in India. (She had become a devotee of a certain spiritual teacher and was installing an obelisk in his ashram when it fell and killed her.)

Ms. Brown led a fast-track life early on, but settled down after her marriage (the third of four) to fellow artist Gordon Cook in 1967. “Joan, Gordon, and Rufus



Joan Brown's 'Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat,' 1970, is on view at George Adams. *PHOTO: GEORGE ADAMS GALLERY*

[their dog] in *Front of the S.F. Opera House*,” painted two years later and the largest work on view, is, in her mature style, another quite impressive painting —dignified yet intimate, simple yet subtle. In it and such works as a self-portrait with her son, “*Christmas Time 1970 (Joan & Noel)*” (1970), she essentially tones down and cheers up Max Beckmann’s brooding hyperbole.

Later, as presaged by “*Woman Waiting in a Theatre Lobby*” (1975), Ms. Brown would further simplify her human figures and backgrounds into semi-abstraction. While those paintings are certainly good, the ones in this show capture her high point.

### **Life of Cats: Selections From the Hiraki Ukiyo-e Collection**



Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's 'Looking Tiresome: The Appearance of a Virgin of the Kansei Era,' 1888, is on view at Japan Society. PHOTO: HIRAKI UKIYO-E FOUNDATION

## Japan Society

333 E. 47th St., (212) 832-1155

Through June 7

There may be no more surefire combination for a delightfully beautiful art exhibition than cats and Japanese prints from the Edo Period (1615-1868). Felines arrived in Japan in the middle of the sixth century, aboard ships (surreptitiously or not, we don't know) importing sacred Buddhist scriptures from China. Aside from the cryptic, magisterial insouciance that made them ideal pets (full disclosure: I am a cat owner), they were very good at killing rats.

From then on, it was kitty bar the door. There's a cat in "The Tale of Genji,"

considered by some to be the world's first true novel, written in the 11th century by Lady Murasaki Shikibu, and an image of that cat is in the show. So is one of the most reproduced of Utagawa Hiroshige's pictures, "Asakusa Rice Fields and Torinomachi Festival" (1857), featuring a white cat sitting on a windowsill, looking out over a landscape with Mount Fuji in the distance. "Looking Tiresome: The Appearance of a Virgin From the Kansei Era" (1888), by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, also makes an appearance; the picture of a woman in a kimono with her white feline is one of the best visual essays on pattern and delicate line that you'll ever see.

The wittily installed exhibition (e.g., a transparent screen with cat silhouettes greets visitors at the entrance to one gallery) also includes examples of late-19th-century mass-produced ceramic cats with paws raised to say hello. This aesthetic probably led to the "Hello Kitty" toys of the 1970s and perhaps, eventually, to the Internet infestation of cute cat videos. But we are here to praise, not to blame.



Annette Lemieux's 'Companion Piece,' 2015, is on view at Kent Fine Art. PHOTO: ELYSE HARARY/KENT FINE ART

### **Annette Lemieux: Everybody wants to be a catchy tune.**

Kent Fine Art

210 11th Ave., (212) 365-9500

Through May 16

It's been a long time since I've seen a solo show with this many obvious other-artist sources—albeit some intentionally so. "Belle Halleine (Peach)" (2015) is a riff on Marcel Duchamp's perfume bottle, with a label photo of Annette Lemieux (b. 1957) replacing that of Duchamp in drag. "Companion Piece" (2015) stand a

real, upright sled next to an actual-size photograph of it (printed on canvas that extends out onto the gallery floor). It is a two-thirds remake of Joseph Kosuth's bellwether 1965 conceptual-art piece, "One and Three Chairs." ("Companion Piece" is missing only a photostat of a dictionary definition of "sled.") And a wall of bisymmetrical, mirrored, photographic images of hands practically shouts "John Baldessari!"

And yet...and yet, there is something about the whole of Ms. Lemieux's exhibition that insists there is much more to it than art-world inside jokes. She started out as a painter and worked for a while as a studio assistant to David Salle, which might account for her taste for discontinuous images. Another of Kent Fine Art's almost trademark elegantly austere installations affords the works not just visual breathing space but thinking space as well. (My own thoughts stray to the idea of doubles within doubles.) Finally, there's the fact that Ms. Lemieux teaches at Harvard, in its "Visual and Environmental Studies" department. Taking all this together, one would be well advised not to jump to conclusions—which may be the whole puzzling point of this dryly fascinating show.

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