

Deborah Brown



P O U N D P O R T R A I T S

Kindnesses of Strangers

It is rare in current art to find strong images that picture loving kindness. Perhaps that is because it is an experience difficult to depict; more likely it is a feeling infrequently felt. Undoubtedly some ambitious artists don't want to risk blunting their stylistic "edge" by messing around with such ostensibly soft emotions. It's easier to be hard. Or, when conveying receptive devotion, rather than relying on clichés of sentimentality, it is harder to be emotionally and artistically authentic. So it is especially praiseworthy that Deborah Brown has ambitiously chosen to portray open affection, that she is brave enough to depict it in a relationship fraught with the potential for sappiness -- that between people and dogs -- and that she filters these elements through an artistic acumen and produces striking images.

This body of paintings of human-canine duos grew out of Brown's prior format of a single dog per painting. Overhead perspective on the diagonal, lightly textured monochromatic backgrounds and mobile poses produced compositions as much about irregular shape and pattern against muted fields as animal portraiture. While depicting different breeds and personalities, the angular positioning of the dog on the rectangular field and the formal clarity of the compositions disrupted any tendency toward saccharine regard for humankind's earliest domesticated animal companion. At the same time, the artist's fondness for these dogs is transparent and many of these pictures are frankly adorable.

The present group widens the thematic purview to couple dogs with the persons who work at The Humane Society of New York or who, like the artist herself, volunteer there. Central to these pictures are robust physical interactions; we see much touching, petting, and hugging. Sammy, a blond furry mutt (really a cross between a loosely soft, shag-covered pillow and a human baby), relaxes into Maiya's chest, secured by her hand encircling his tummy, in a kind of dazed ecstasy with limp protruding tongue. And the smile on the identically blond Maiya suggests her own enjoyment of this bodily merging with a surrogate child (*Maiya and Sammy*). Images like these call up Blanche Du Bois' wry remark in *Streetcar Named Desire* that she always depended on the kindness of strangers. Part of the pleasure of these works is the ambiguity of whether it is the human or the animal who is doing the greater kindness of providing companionship.

As in that painting, subtle visual correspondences abound in these "Pound Portraits." Another instance is between the boney faces and long noses of Maiya and Tempest, a dachshund she holds aloft, displaying her small charge in all its tawny detail for Brown to photograph (the artist will synthesize many such snapshots for her painting's composition). Likewise, a crouching woman's sharp jaw and angled fedora echo the thrust snout of her Doberman -- their level face-to-face closeness suggesting intimate communication (*Meryl and Princess Jewel*). Alternately, Pierre's brawny chest is powerfully distinct from the petite form of the Chihuahua he hugs, Shirley. This picture of intimate regard is enlivened by rich contrasts between a suede grey background, Pierre's chocolate skin and tart chartreuse shirt, and the perky lightness of Shirley, enclosed on his lap.

Brown's manner presenting this warm affection at once leavens and underscores it. The visceral intimacy is removed from commonplace realism by the absence of descriptive details of an environment. The conjunction of animal and human is located nowhere specific, their figural masses generally juxtaposed only to a continuous field of color, thereby displacing the scenes to an abstract space, or a place where all else falls away. In Brown's hands the newly vivid backgrounds and tangy contrasts between them, clothing and fur are not only visually arresting but narrative allusions to the interactions' emotional charge.

Thus, the subject of these new works is less double portraits than studies of relationships: between temporary masters and potential pets, figural forms and strongly present backgrounds, abstracted presentation and the real emotions conveyed by these arrangements. Picturing affectionate interactions with the animal that in history has often been called "fido" and has symbolized faithfulness, these images counter our present period of political, economic, and hence social instabilities. The enjoyment offered by these works comes from not only their artistic vitality, but in witnessing the obvious rewards of these acts of kindnesses between once-strangers.

Suzaan Boettger is an art historian, critic and lecturer. Her recent book is *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (University of California Press, 2002).