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SULTRY SPIRITS Delia Brown, "Bar at the Caribou Club," 2007

LIFE OF LUXURY

Renowned artist **Delia Brown** weighs in on her newest body of work.

| By Amy Phelan and Hannah Flegelman |

Delia Brown, pictured above in "Bar at the Caribou Club," is known for painting scenes of herself and friends cavorting and indulging in life's luxuries in the company of Champagne and multimillion-dollar artworks, in borrowed mansions and island villas. Brown gained notoriety in October 2000 when *The New York Times Magazine* ran an eight-page spread of her watercolors, showcasing actual fashion items such as a lace gown by Christina Perrin and beaded pants by Jean-Paul Gaultier. Since then, her work has explored how desire is often mediated through commercial culture, material possessions and extravagant scenery.

Baldwin Gallery presents Brown's latest body of work in an exhibition titled *PURsE PAINTING*, Dec. 26 through Jan. 31. The images depict beautiful women in lush landscapes and sumptuous interiors. This exhibition marks the first time Brown has painted from found imagery, drawing her subjects from the fashion photographs taken for designer-handbag advertisements. In *PURsE PAINTING*, Brown's canvases have grown to be life-size, a shift partly inspired by her love of monumental, bourgeois portraits from the 19th century.

We sat down with Brown to discuss the genesis of her new body of work, its relationship with fashion and her next dream collaboration.

Tell us a bit more about *PURSE PAINTING*. What inspired you to use these found advertisements and blow them up to human-scale? It's new for me to work from pre-existing imagery. Typically, I stage my scenes using friends and locations conducive to whatever narrative I'm exploring. Flipping through some women's magazines several months ago, I was struck by how incredibly compelling I found the images of, for instance, Julianne Moore with baby lions in a Bulgari ad; Marion Cotillard on the streets of Paris for Dior; or a Salvatore Ferragamo campaign featuring Kate Moss strewn across velvet chaises in dramatic gowns, hair upswept, reminiscent of the seductive portraits by John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase that I have long loved.

I consider the struggle of the artist—engaging with subject and materials—to be a kind of spiritual exercise, a way of comprehending the universe and of endowing physical objects, like paintings or sculptures, with a magic borne of that wrangling engagement. By appropriating advertising images, I have found a pleasant irony: The dichotomy between the spiritual and the commercial gives way to optimism, a sense that all things can be regenerative, repurposed, given new meaning. It is that tension between what the image was (an advertisement) and what it has become (a painting) that creates a frisson that I find most compelling. I think that the paintings reanimate the imagery and give us permanent markers of a very specific moment.

The jump in scale is effective in changing the relationship between viewer and image. In a glossy magazine, the images are quickly dismissed or digested, with the possible thought, "I want that," or "I need that," about the product (in this case, handbags). When you stand in front of a life-size work, the painting imposes itself upon you and challenges you to get closer, to step back, to negotiate your relationship to it.



ON THE SCENE Delia Brown, "DBL TRBL in PRDS," 2007

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How important is fashion to you, and what role does it play in the work? I'm not exactly a follower of fashion. I rarely even look at magazines if I'm not getting a haircut. However, I have always been fascinated by glamour. Ginger from *Gilligan's Island* was my idol as a girl. I think all of that stuff—lipstick, sequins, big tousled hair—is sexy and speaks to me of a kind of stylized reckless abandon.

I also like the narcissism of being so involved in 'your look.' A lot of my work is about inhabiting an intense state of narcissistic indulgence... so dressing up, dressing provocatively... these things all help me and my 'accomplices,' the friends in the work with me, step outside of our everyday personas and into something a little, well, perhaps more dangerous or daring.

Do you collect art? If so, what genre or medium do you like to collect? You've mentioned a love for 19th century paintings—do you have a favorite piece? I love Manet and Degas. They are my favorites. All the flâneur painters in 19th century Paris—I wish I could have been one of them! I have gifts from artist friends—Mark Grotjahn, Mungo Thomson, Will Cotton—and pieces I purchased, including a gorgeous photograph by my graduate school teacher, James Welling.

Throughout your career as a painter, you assume different characters like an actress. Do you personally identify with the roles you take on, or do you prefer to conjure a persona that is purely fantasy? I'd love to have RZA (of the Wu-Tang Clan) do a music video with me where I could be a kung-fu badass! He just directed a movie called *The Man With the Iron Fists*. My song would have to be "Chick With the Iron Paintbrushes." I don't know if he'd remember when my two-girl group The Fuzz opened for the Wu in 1994 in San Francisco, but that was one of the highlights of my life. 🐶



SOAKING IT IN Delia Brown, "Hot Tub," 2012