

David Frankel on DELIA BROWN

WHAT, ARE YOU JEALOUS? PERHAPS, YOUNG ARTISTS, that's because you didn't steal a snappy enough title for your first full New York show. Discovering a happy overlap between Valley-speak and art history, Delia Brown copped hers from Gauguin, no less, who called a painting of 1892 *Aha oe feii?*, a phrase he translated "What, are you jealous?" as part of a yarn about the good life in Tahiti. Brown too is a painter of the good life, but hers looks like it happens in Beverly Hills. Or if not Beverly Hills, anywhere there are pools and patios and plantings, and where the sun is warm enough for women to lounge in little but their shades. Or else it could be indoors, in expensive but not especially tasteful drawing rooms where bags of Doritos and cans of Coke clutter the coffee table alongside bottles of Moët. Now the women wear flimsy silk dresses or fur shawls or beaded pants, and they drink their Moët and they talk on their cell phones and they sit in each others' laps, and—you're not there.

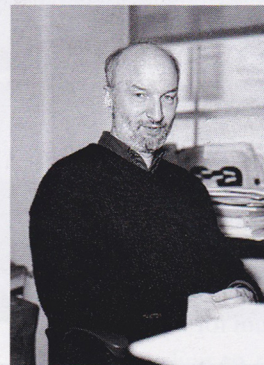
Envy and exclusion: These are the standards of Brown's art. It is a devious premise, since envy and exclusion are as near to most of us as are the emotions we'd rather cherish (what am I saying—nearer), yet

they're also a dirtier secret. In this and other aspects, like the fact that she paints women without their clothes on, Brown's pictures are calculatedly seductive. The images themselves are perfectly OK—many of them watercolors, more than competent though short of sensually gorgeous, in an illustrational style evoking tony magazines of decades past—but their real kick lies in their subject, an indulgent comfort level that might suppose itself an ideal if it only had any ambition. Their framing suggests photographs as their source, with sequential scenes implying a roving camera; and in fact Brown did stage these pool parties and cocktails, only to present their traces to a public she did not invite to them. In Los Angeles last year, in the New Wight Gallery at UCLA, she threw a party, then cordoned it off from its visitors with velvet ropes.

By serendipity, Gauguin got his Tahitian wrong: The closer meaning of *Aha oe feii?*, apparently, is "What, have you got a grudge against me?" Beneath its placid surface, Brown's work deals in grudges and resentments, and she could become a target of some herself; to celebrate her show at D'Amelio Terras last fall, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a group of her

images as a fashion spread, the clothes and their prices scrupulously labeled—an appropriate fate for this coolly manipulative art. Were you feeling charitable, you might call these paintings corrupted pastorals, and imagine their maker as mourning a lost possibility: the kind of (arguably delusional) dream of a meaningful life that drew Gauguin to Tahiti. But that's not really their tone, though they're not just cynical either: They suggest a woman who pretty much has a handle on what she sees and is looking for knowing ways to talk about it. □

As an editor in the Department of Publications at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and a longtime former senior editor (and current contributing editor) at *Artforum*,



DAVID FRANKEL has seen as much writing on new art come across his desk as anyone working in the art world today. His own regular reviews and features this year have covered both the young (Janietta Eyre, Sam Taylor-Wood) and the young at heart. R. Crumb's place-mat drawings are the subject of his review elsewhere in this issue (p. 131).

David Frankel in his office at MoMA. Photo: Walead Beshty.



Left: Delia Brown, *Untitled Genre Scene (High Tea)*, 2000, watercolor on paper, 11½ x 13¾".

Right: Delia Brown, *What, Are You Jealous? (Los Angeles)*, 2000, oil on canvas, 36 x 36".

