



## Delia Brown

ANGLES GALLERY/COUNTRY CLUB AT MARTHA OTERO

*By Jan Tumlir*



A Marxist critic would argue that the uniquely unstable position of the artist within the social hierarchy is a central determinant of all that he or she makes, even if it is not explicitly acknowledged in the work, and perhaps especially then. But what if this factor were declared right up front, as it is in the paintings of Delia Brown, which have long treated class jumping and upward and downward mobility as staple themes? From the start of her career, Brown has sought

to manifest a dimension of the art economy that tends to remain latent--the point at which relations between people and between things intersect and become conflated. From the outset, she has also approached this territory from two seemingly irreconcilable tangents: one part autobiographical account of the facts of her life inside the art world and one part aspirational fantasy.

Picked up just out of grad school by Margo Leavin Gallery in 2001, Brown proceeded to transparently represent her newly professionalized status in works that had her lounging at the Leavin home in the Hollywood Hills. In a more recent series, "Felicity and Caprice," 2006-12, which was shown at Angles Gallery this spring, Brown switches roles: She now appears as the older, wealthy benefactor to a scrappy art-student ingenue. The latter is introduced to us sitting on a bench in Central Park, painting *en plein air*, when, in the next canvas, the former approaches to admire the work at closer range, a mawkish composition of two deer nuzzling in a field of greens. It quickly becomes apparent that Brown's entire series has been lifted from Claude Chabrol's 1968 film, *Les Biches*, her pictorial cycle unfolding somewhat like that movie's storyboard, with key scenes transposed into the artist's own cultural milieu and now featuring her real-life friends and acquaintances.

As Brown's female protagonists flit between various lush interiors, from Felicity's Upper East Side apartment to her beach house in the Hampton's, their relationship turns toxic. Paul--a man modeled on John McWhinnie, the rare-books dealer and art collector who died at the age of forty-three in a snorkeling accident this past January--comes between them, ultimately leading the protege to murder her own patron and usurp both her place and persona. As the narrative plays out, we observe Brown's young counterpart, who, having gained entree into a world of privileged indolence as an artist, is never again shown at work. And Brown herself--whose character, we assume, has already completed this narrative arc--likewise appears interested only in mastering the finer points of a life of leisure.

It would be reductive to conclude that art is therefore being proposed here as merely a means to another end, or that what one produces ultimately matters less than where it can take you. Yet whatever measure of self-reflexivity accrues in this work is instantly reflected back out onto the social context it occupies. Whether this amounts to a critique is debatable, but certainly Brown is adept at testing the sympathies of her purported clientele and other artists alike. In "Last Exit: Punta Junta," 2012, a painting series that was concurrently on view at Martha Otero, the theme of infiltration receives an openly carnivalesque treatment. Here, as well, the artist paints from staged photographs; in this case, of herself and her girlfriends partying inside the tropical retreats of the ultrarich in their absence. Dressed in fatigues and bikinis, brandishing kitchen knives and squirt guns, they come off like insurgent agents of economic retribution, but with a permission

slip from on high. Surprisingly, as every last distinction between living and playacting is being erased from the world, it reappears in Brown's painting in a finely gradated range of pose and expression that she renders not only legible but also convincing. Sensitive to the slightest psychological nuances of the give-and-take of artistic commerce, she registers an ambivalence that can no longer be confined to the artist alone. The fine line between consuming and being consumed is effectively what connects her to her clients.

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