

Art Ba Ba

Jenny Brosinski: How do incidental traces of material become visual metaphors in painting?

Article by Li Suchao
May 24, 2023



Installation views of Jenny Brosinski's exhibition *TOO FAT TO FLY*, May 12 - June 24, 2023, Almine Rech Shanghai / © Jenny Brosinski - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Alessandro Wang

The primitive canvases crafted by Jenny Brosinski exhibit a captivating interplay of gentle, luminous tones, wherein understated lines and brushstrokes coalesce to shape non-representational patterns. At times, a few arbitrary strokes reveal candid postures reminiscent of childlike doodles, thus imbuing the artwork with elements of recognizable imagery. This is the most immediate perception conveyed by the paintings of German artist Jenny Brosinski. Since graduating from the Weißensee Academy of Art in Berlin in 2012, Brosinski has established her artistic practice within the vibrant ambiance of Berlin, allowing the city's ethos of freedom and spontaneity to permeate and inform her creative process.

Brosinski's artistic vocabulary is considered as a fusion of "Dirty Minimalism" and "Conceptual Expressionism," where embellished irregular lines and doodles often relates to automatic writing or psychography — a practice that allows the writing instrument to guide and manipulate the artist's hand without one consciously writing. The utilization of unadorned marks, discernible brushstrokes, and spray painting imparts an air of spontaneity to these imageries, perhaps influenced by aspects of improvisation, events, and bodily instincts emphasized by the Happening movement during the mid-20th century. Meanwhile, a meticulous balance of colors is maintained on the canvas, with dominant employment of primary hues such as

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yellow, blue, black, and sienna. This deliberate color arrangement, coupled with the techniques of smearing and repainting, serves to generate and release dramatic tension within the artworks.



Jenny Brosinski, *So I guess I gotta stay now*, 2023 - Oil, spray paint, pencil and dirt on canvas - 213 x 183 cm, 84 x 72 in / © Jenny Brosinski - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Matthias Kolb

Brosinski's artistic practice is characterized by a deliberate combination of materiality. She incorporates materials such as acrylic, charcoal, spray paint, dust, olive oil, and detergent, among others, into her artworks. By capitalizing on the canvas's responsiveness to dust or detergent, she brings forth the traces and history of the materials, making these imprints a medium of painting and placing the materiality in the foreground. The color blocks and marks that initially resemble stains function as visual metaphors, embodying a process of reconfiguration and deconstruction of traditional painting conventions, boldly presented before the viewer's gaze. The playful doodles and cartoonish images sometimes evoke the simplicity and imaginative spirit reminiscent of Joan Miró's works. This intertwining of colors and forms endows Brosinski's paintings with a distinct vitality. Through layering and mastery of negative space, Brosinski's artworks primarily explore the spatiality of the two-dimensional plane and the interaction between painting itself and the materials, naturally blending abstraction and representation.

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In 1953, Robert Rauschenberg embarked on a month-long endeavor in which he meticulously erased a drawing by de Kooning, leaving behind only the remnants of his erasure on an otherwise empty canvas. Through this groundbreaking artwork entitled "*Erased de Kooning Drawing*," Rauschenberg challenged the prevailing conventions of abstract expressionism and interrogated the very notion of what defines an artwork. Can a piece be created through the act of erasure, the deliberate removal of marks rather than their application? In a broader sense, Rauschenberg's unorthodox approach compelled viewers to recognize that erasure itself, alongside its residual historical traces, can serve as a valid means of artistic creation. This radical simplification of artistic methodology finds resonance in Brosinski's own work, as she reduces the composition of her canvases to their fundamental elements while simultaneously preserving the imprints of smearing and covering. Eschewing conventional sketching, Brosinski's creations emerge from a personal set of rules or a deliberate attempt to defy established norms, unfettered by predetermined subjects or content.



Jenny Brosinski, *C.U.C.T.G.*, 2023 - Oil, spray paint, and oil stick on canvas - 202 x 168 cm, 79 1/2 x 66 in / © Jenny Brosinski - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Matthias Kolb

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The recent exhibition titled “*TOO FAT TO FLY*” at Almine Rech Shanghai showcased a collection of Brosinski’s latest paintings. The exhibition’s title, reminiscent of Brosinski’s works, exudes a playful and whimsical charm. Employing the metaphor of a bumblebee, which perplexes scientists due to its inability to meet the aerodynamic requirements for flight despite its body size, the exhibition playfully takes its name. This metaphor finds resonance in Robert Cormier’s young adult novel “*The Bumblebee Flies Anyway*,” where the bumblebee serves as a metaphor for the absurd and non-rational aspects of life itself. With paintings such as “*So I guess I gotta stay now*,” “*Isn’t it lovely all alone?*,” and “*C.U.C.T.G.*,” one readily identifies cartoonish creatures with smudged or fragmented bodies scattered across the canvas, coalescing into abstract images as a cohesive whole. It is noteworthy that Brosinski’s paintings predominantly manifest themselves in expansive dimensions, thereby alluding to a heightened realm of sensory experience. The amalgamation of color, brushstrokes, linework, and materials in conjunction with the canvas medium engenders profound sentiments associated with inherent primitivism and exuberance, resulting in an overwhelming immersive encounter.

In this context, it is imperative to acknowledge the presence of the prevalent New Expressionism from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s — a figurative painting style that communicates intense emotions through bold brushwork, distorted imagery, vibrant colors, and large-scales. Positioned as a rebellion against the indifferent and ascetic minimalism and conceptual art, this new expressionism, exemplified by artists such as Philip Guston, Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Christopher Le Brun, and Julian Schnabel, seeks to restore the emotive power of artworks by harkening back to the German Expressionism of the early 20th century, while resisting conventions of symbols. These factors may serve as significant influences on Brosinski’s creative process.



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In Brosinski's artistic repertoire, her sculptures serve as the natural habitats for the various subject images birthed in her paintings. With diverse mediums such as ceramics, copper, wood, and stone carvings, she endeavors to depict representational forms that stand in contrast to her painted works. For instance, her "Lockdown" series features ceramic houses, while other sculptures take the form of containers, copper structures, or stone carvings resembling cartoonish figures. The sculptures encompass a wide range of imagery, including snowmen, ghosts, puppies, crocodiles, smiley faces, and suns. These creatures, concealed within her paintings, appear to be reanimated in the sculptural realm, infused with a sense of childlike innocence and vitality through the application of vibrant spray paint. Like her paintings, Brosinski's sculptures exhibit a primitive roughness, evoking associations with prehistoric art forms such as animal and anthropomorphic figurines from the Aurignacian or Natufian cultures. These early sculptures, characterized by their simplicity, were often associated with rituals and serve as important indicators of human history, cognitive thoughts, and technological advancements. Clearly, the return to primitivism in art is the "other shore" Brosinski seeks to reach.



Jenny Brosinski, *I was looking at all the life*, 2022 - Spary paint and bronze - 84 x 60 x 100 cm, 33 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 39 1/2 in / © Jenny Brosinski - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Melissa Castro Duarte

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Jenny Brosinski in her studio, 2021 / © Jenny Brosinski – Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Nils Mueller

Prior to Brosinski's exhibition opening at Almine Rech, we were fortunate to engage in a brief interview with the artist, delving into her perspectives regarding the utilization of diverse materials, the inherent material properties manifested in her artworks, and her approach to making —a vigilant avoidance of dogma and discipline, instead fostering a mindset characterized by criticality, curiosity, and a receptive outlook.

Art Ba Ba: First of all, can you please talk about your upcoming solo exhibition *Too Fat To Fly* at Almine Rech Shanghai? Are the paintings all created this year? Is there any particular distinction from your previous works?

The exhibition title *Too Fat To Fly* refers to the bumblebee paradox, according to which bumblebees are aerodynamically incapable of flight. Because the bumblebee doesn't know the laws of aerodynamics, it still flies. Regardless of the fact that scientific research has meanwhile been carried out into why bumblebees can fly, this says a lot about us humans. Based on the exhibition title, all works were created for this exhibition in 2023.

Art Ba Ba: Your use of mixed media, including materials like dirt, dust, and detergent, gives your work a very unique texture and appearance. Can you tell us more about why you choose to work with these materials, and how you usually incorporate them into your pieces?

Raw canvas is sensitive to dust, dirt, or detergents. In my work I leave a lot of this vulnerable surface - the traces of dust, dirt or cleaning agents assert themselves

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next to the usual paint as a painting medium, with their own history - and so I refer to my handling with the material and my painterly process.



Jenny Brosinski, *if you let it go I will go up, up, up*, 2023 - Oil, acrylic, spray paint, and oil stick on canvas - 162 x 132 cm, 64 x 52 in / © Jenny Brosinski - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Matthias Kolb

Art Ba Ba: Your work has been compared to a variety of artistic styles, from abstraction, minimalism to mark-making, while with a raw and spontaneous quality; how do you balance this sense of improvisation with the need for planning and structure when creating a painting?

I leave the comparison or assessment of my work to others. Without sketches, haphazardly so to speak, I start playfully on the floor – only to change later my perspective and give in to my desire for a composition. But even if I appreciate seemingly fleeting gestures and give room for failure, in the end it's all about the (self-fulfilling) work.

Art Ba Ba: Many of your paintings are quite large in scale, how does the size of the canvas influence the way you approach a piece?

I'm fascinated by the freedom that is inherent in a big canvas - and how it both

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questions and challenges me at the same time. In larger formats I learn a lot that I can then use at best in smaller ones.

Art Ba Ba: Are there any specific artists or individuals that have inspired you as an artist and shaped your artistic style?

There are certainly quite a few - definitely too many to name single here and there will certainly be more, I just love looking at art and reading about it.



Jenny Brosinski, *Need a place to hide*, 2023 - Oil, olive oil, graphite and spray paint on canvas - 162 x 132 cm, 64 x 52 in / © Jenny Brosinski - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Matthias Kolb

Art Ba Ba: Within your sculptures, it seems that the abstract forms in your paintings coming alive with figurative, animal-like forms; how would you see the connections between your painting and sculpture practice?

Perhaps their connection lies in their very opposite? The sculptures often appear to me as if they were the population of my painterly cosmos.

Art Ba Ba: How do you think your work will evolve in the future?

If I already knew exactly how I would paint in ten or twenty years, then I could take the direct shortcut to my late work. But since I don't know, I remain in the process

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- curious, excited and critical of what is to come. I don't want to rule out anything from the outset.



Jenny Brosinski, *Thought I found a way*, 2023 - Oil and charcoal on canvas - 162 x 132 cm, 64 x 52 in / © Jenny Brosinski - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Matthias Kolb