

# Be Nice to the Big Blue Sea

Cecily Brown

Diana Gurlay

Late 20th-Century to 21st-Century Art

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109" X 171"

My first encounter with Cecily Brown was in a New York Times Sunday Magazine article about gender roles in the art world. Could women hold their own in the male dominated field who have also had big personalities, hungers, and lots of angst. The article compared two painters, Cecily Brown and Celia Paul, who chose different paths with regard to their craft, their “men” and motherhood. Celia Paul was very tragic because she gave up her child and career for a man, while Cecily was intelligent, powerful and extremely focused. Although she wanted to be the “best possible girl-who-wants-to-be-a-boy”<sup>1</sup>, she has kept her femininity while holding her own with the big boys and later became a mother struggling to juggle painting and her daughter.

Cecily attended the Slade School and was peers with the YBA although not into their celebrity status and mass media impact. Painting was viewed suspiciously at that time as old-fashioned and not the preferred media of someone wanting to make a splash. It’s been done! What else is there to say with paint? With her refined painterly technique and penchant for looking at the old masters, she did not fit the ironic stance of this group and eventually left for New York.

Looking at the old masters plays a big part in her paintings. Favorites like Delacroix, Titian, Bacon, Bruegel, Bosch, De Kooning and particularly Degas, are the basis for drawings she does daily to understand how the paintings work. She draws and draws and draws so that images become internalized and catalogued to filter up freely to her canvas. Another strategy she uses when studying the old masters’ painting is by doing puzzles. I myself have done several Degas

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Cusk, “Can a Woman who is an Artist Ever be Just an Artist,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/07/magazine/women-art-celia-paul-cecily-brown.html>.

paintings as a puzzle, as well as other masters. It really does allow one to become intimate with a painting and see and understand brushstroke and how they create an image and how the composition fits together. Bruegel is one of her favorite puzzles as his images are so dense so you can really zoom in on smaller sections at a time and learn the different scenes. I saw some drawings she did of Bruegel's Carnival and Lent early in her career and they are just sections and little scenes from it. She picks out the darks and important lines beautifully and you can see how she is figuring out how everything fits together. Later, she went back to the painting and these drawings now cover much larger areas and/or the whole painting – it's like she matured enough to finally internalize the whole picture. She also pays attention to how other master artists have looked at the old masters – i.e., Picasso viewing Delacroix, Delacroix viewing Rubens, Rubens viewing Titian and so forth. She exemplifies acknowledging lineage and leveraging it.

When mining these old masters, she does not directly use the images when painting, but all the drawing of these amazing paintings and her favorite image within them are in mind as she paints and they bubble to the surface of the canvas in interesting and different ways. Although the images she mines may look exactly like the original, their treatment is very different so they are no longer copies but something that becomes fresh and provides new information or points of view. Themes of sweet scenes with underlying anxiety, hidden layers, menace and violence in the benign, horror and sweetness, sexuality under the surface and lots of contradictions – we are voyeurs to intimate scenes that are charged with action and emotion and full of conflict, both thematically and visually. Cecily mines these scenes and mashes them up into something else that is very different from their original portrayal. Responding to what she has seen and drawn, the coopted images lie incorporated under the surface and peek out when you really start looking

at the painting and spending time in it. It's kind of like Sampling in Music where something from the past is re-used and surrounded by the modern to make it completely different from what it was. She is re-interpreting cultural and historical references that she loves from the past and making them her own and very modern and full of life. Painting is not dead!

Cecily is interested in bodies in motion, bodies that are doing something and where they are doing it. There is always tons of movement, activity and tension where the restless eye can spend lots of time exploring. The nude ensemble is the basis for most paintings and although sensual, erotic and sexual, they are not scandalous or pornographic. What creates a lot of the movement and tension is the opposing forces of figuration and abstraction. There is figuration, but it may be a foot here, a torso there, one face is painted pretty life-like while another is a smear. Bodies are seen from many different angles and sizes at once. Figures are in a visual shorthand that is loose and expressive with subjects glimpsed. What is the minimal amount of information that can still give meaning and presence? If an image is too clean, a viewer may get it too quickly and then move on. Cecily is interested in that point where figuration breaks down and just before it becomes totally abstract the painting can move back and forth from figuration and abstraction and the viewer/voyeur can always be surprised as things are there one minute and gone the next. It requires slow attention and draws us into her world.

There is organization in her groupings, but also lots of chaos. Form and brushstroke create multiple layers of meaning to create a human presence that is not fully depicted. Her paintings can be viewed at a glance or one can spend quite a lot of time moving around and finding new and unexpected emotion. The more you look, the more you will realize. In this time of hurry up

and get to the next thing, her paintings really draw you in to slow down and take your time to see and understand. The glimpses of figuration are the hooks to enter the painting to move around and see what else there is to see and respond to, whether you know why or not. Her fragmented and splintered world is constantly unfolding and never says just one thing. I thought it interesting that she does not like total abstraction as it becomes decorative to her.<sup>2</sup> She needs figuration of a body doing an activity in order for the painting to have meaning. These are the hooks that talk about what it is to be alive and alive with meat and flesh. Total abstraction is just paint doing tricks.<sup>3</sup>

One of Cecily's favorite paintings from an old master is Degas' Young Spartans Exercising. It's a beautifully soft painting yet filled with the tension of adolescence and opposing groups – girls on one side and boys on the other. The boys trying to be arrogant but are intimidated at the same time, while the girls, particularly the one thrusting forward, are confident and challenging. Lots of sexual tension implied in this timeless theme. But, there's too many legs on the girls' side! This ambiguity of where legs go and that there are too many is right up Cecily's alley and can lead directly to her own ambiguity and abstraction of figures. I like how she said, when going back to look at this painting after many years, she realized, even though she had changed, the painting had not<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> An Evening with Cecily Brown: (*In Conversation with Jasper Sharp*),” *Contemporary Talks Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, February 2, 2018.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuiaXaJOTLI>

<sup>3</sup> An Evening with Cecily Brown: (*In Conversation with Jasper Sharp*),” *Contemporary Talks Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, February 2, 2018.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuiaXaJOTLI>

<sup>4</sup> Cecily Brown, review of Young Spartans Exercising by Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas, *The National Gallery*, October 17, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKHpk0o-R8>

Be kind to the Big Blue Sea nicely highlights all these ideas. It is a nude ensemble in a figuration/abstraction battle with lots of energy and movement. And, its male nudes! That is new and she is referencing a male nude by Max Beckmann (I tried to find it, but could not, although I have seen that nude but I don't know where.) This rear view of a nicely muscled male nude stands directly in the middle of the painting and is the largest figure. There is enough of him realistically portrayed that we can easily use him to dive into the painting with its many legs and faces with emotions similar to Young Spartans. Mostly flesh color with greens and blues flashing throughout (greens lifted from Young Spartans as well?), she achieves distance with no horizon line. Bodies move in many different states of action with some faces more realized than others. Keeping figuration and images from Young Spartans in mind, Cecily has created a scene that includes just a smidgeon of "blue sea", yet is a distinctly beach scene to me. There are groups of figures facing off and in the lower right corner is a male on hands and knees directly taken from Young Spartans. And, like Young Spartans, there is sexual tension at the beach! Lots of flesh and activity with sensuous sand and sea. Some faces are realistic while others are smeared or even look like a sea creature. Lots of legs as well, as in Degas' picture – I think that is one of her favorite things about that picture, too many legs! There is a figure with arms in the air exactly like in Young Spartans. There is a thigh I see from Degas. So many direct lifts from the Degas painting, yet it doesn't feel like copying as they totally belong only in this painting. I love seeing the historical contrast of Degas' scene against Cecily's scene. Similar, but definitely not.

At first when looking at Cecily's paintings, I was totally confused and overwhelmed and had a hard time focusing. However, the more I looked, the more I saw and the more I understood which made me love them. I think she is an amazing painter and feel like I am thinking about and looking at my own paintings differently. One of my goals, which she beautifully portrays and talks about the process of, is the mix of the figure and abstract. I think she is an amazing person as well. She does not seem to have the "ego" that artists have traditionally been thought to have like the male expressionist painters from the New York Times article. Even better than them, she has a solidly genuine persona that is confident and generous. I loved when she said, she doesn't paint for shows<sup>5</sup>, she just paints and if it happens that she has something ready when a place is putting together a show, then nice timing! She is confident enough in herself to hear her own voice and follow her intuitions without chasing money or fame. As a contemporary artist with a direct lineage to the Old Masters whose paintings are just as skillful, rich and genuine as a Picasso, Delacroix or Pollock. She has bridged old and new in her supreme battle between figuration and abstraction. But I wonder how she knows when a painting is done!

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