



CAT. NO. 44. *The Bride*, 1970.

TO KNOW THIS PLACE FOR THE FIRST TIME

Interpreting Joan Brown

JACQUELYNN BAAS

Myself, in an endless succession of roles, the things that are part of my daily life, are the best vehicles I can use to express what I feel about myself, my experience.¹

I work from both the conscious and unconscious states, hoping for a balance of both, which I suspect rarely happens. The images, ideas and techniques in my pictures only serve to reflect my thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, relationships with other people and my daily perception of the environment I exist in.²

—Joan Brown

The art of Joan Brown was relentlessly focused on herself, her world, and the discovery of a metaphysical reality that could help her organize her experience and existence. In this single-minded pursuit of her own psychological and spiritual development through her art, Brown was at odds both with the existentialist outlook of the artist friends of her youth and with the political, ironic, and reductive perspectives that came to dominate the art world after the mid 1960s.³ Throughout her life, Brown studied philosophy and religion, with a focus on universal themes and symbols. She integrated a number of these symbols into her personal iconography, for which her own unconscious also served as an important source. Brown's early artistic idols were Rembrandt and Goya, with their psychologically revealing portraits and self-portraits (see cat. no. 69, p. 118). But her mature work shows greater affinity with the willfully primitive, enigmatic paintings of Paul Gauguin, whose art she also admired (see cat. no. 59, p. 106). Like Gauguin, Brown developed a personal artistic language whose idiosyncratic symbolic vocabulary was drawn from wide-ranging cultural traditions, from art history, and from her imagination.

Joan Brown began in the mid 1950s as a very young artist whose art reflected and developed the styles of her mentors: David Park, Frank Lobdell, Nathan Oliveira,

and, more than anyone, Elmer Bischoff, who "talked my language, although I hadn't heard it before."⁴ By this, Brown meant more than just an artistic language, although Bischoff was clearly a stylistic influence on her: "down deep, psychically, I never got the kind of energies or connections that I got from Elmer."⁵ They shared an interest in metaphysics and mysticism, an interest that never found explicit expression in Bischoff's art and that Brown felt free to express in her work only after 1969, when the unexpected death of her father and the suicide of her mother opened the door to a new emotional freedom.

Bischoff taught Brown to focus on what was around her. "When I get too far out with what I'm doing and no longer have any handle, I go back and work from what I can see and what I know, what I am familiar with and it grounds me and roots me," she told an interviewer in 1985.⁶ Even in her later work, which is heavily symbolic, an occasional painting appears that was clearly done directly from life—like *The Cypress Trees* (cat. no. 102) and the simple, charming *Portrait of Toby the Cat* (cat. no. 103, p. 90), both from 1980. In general, however, Brown's emphasis on the importance of the unconscious in her process of making art, and her mystical attitude toward life, an attitude that seems to have existed from an early age,⁷



CAT. NO. 102. *The Cypress Trees*, 1980.

allow for a generously interpretive reading of art from every period of her career.

Indeed, Brown herself engaged in ongoing interpretation of her work:

I don't mind at all if my work is not perceived as I "think" I intended. Very often I don't know what I intended nor does that question frequently occur to me in the process of conceiving and/or executing a work of art. I've also found that sometimes, when I'm working on a painting I'll think my intentions to be such, only to change my mind about the original intentions at a later date.⁸

Brown was resolutely democratic in her openness to interpretation, stating frequently that "art is for everybody," and that she was as interested in the response to her work of ordinary people as of artists and critics. "I work with symbols," she told an interviewer in 1985. "My work is representational but also very symbolic. When you work with symbols, you leave yourself open, naturally, to people's interpretations, unless the symbols are real cut-and-dried universal symbols that we are all familiar with."⁹

Although Brown shifted her subject matter every few years, some themes permeate all phases of her work. Her own life, including herself at various ages, her child, her pets, and others she cared about together form one leitmotif. A second, very broad category might be called "the other" or, as we have called it for the purposes of the present exhibition, "the world." Her research in this realm was prodigious. Brown's library of some fifteen hundred volumes included books on not only art and ancient cultures, but also religion of all kinds, metaphysics, and mysticism. For Brown as for Saint Paul, the world was made up of things seen and things unseen. The titles of her early abstractions from 1959 and 1960 key us to this attitude: titles like *Dog Dreaming of Things and Images*; an abstract self-portrait, *Thing on Its 21st Birthday*; and *Things in Landscape #1* (fig. 16). The continuity of existence, the connections between "things," was Brown's very un-existential point. One of her favorite authors was Fritjof Capra, whose books emphasize both the similarities between ancient belief systems and recent discoveries in the physical sciences, and the elusive boundaries between matter and energy.¹⁰ In 1985, Brown asserted that:

As time has gone by, the things that I've been interested in are all fitting into place, coming together, like parts of a puzzle. There are still empty spaces, which is a lot more fun than if it was all together, but nevertheless, all

of these pieces are starting to relate and form a whole. Part of my interest in the ancient cultures, the main part, is this spirituality. Years ago it was the art. I spent a lot of time studying the symbolism . . . and the concept: what do symbols mean in the crossovers between the ancient cultures.¹¹

What might a study of the symbolism of Joan Brown yield? What do her symbols mean in the "crossovers" among her researches into art and ancient belief systems, her changing concepts of herself, her relationships with others, and her ongoing search for the meaning of life? In order to investigate this question, I have chosen to focus on one work—*The Bride* (cat. no. 44, p. 188), painted in the spring of 1970—and to use it as a fulcrum, a kind of home base from which to explore some of Brown's most meaningful symbolism.

The year 1970 was a year of prodigious creativity for the thirty-two-year-old artist, and a year of great technical experimentation as well. On Halloween 1968 she had married fellow painter Gordon Cook, her third husband. For Brown, marriage—however problematic—was a desirable state. In 1975 she told an interviewer, "I've been married three times. I get married. I prefer family life. . . . I like the structure of family life, I like the growth and the exchange that can take place with a close relationship. . . . There's a certain funny ritual—as human beings we're connected to rituals—where something happens. It's symbolic, and there's something very big, very large about it. It's not infallible, obviously."¹² A little over two months after her marriage, in January 1969, Brown's alcoholic father died suddenly of a heart attack. Brown's mother hung herself six weeks later. On the day of her mother's death, Brown had a premonition that manifested itself as a new feeling of freedom:

She'd always talked of suicide when I was a kid—constantly referring to suicide—she was going to go off the bridge, all the time she was going to jump off the bridge. She'd say [while reading the newspaper], "Oh, look, here's another one off the bridge. Well, I'm gonna be next," . . . which scares the hell out of you when you're a little kid. . . . I woke up that morning and I felt different, before I called my mother. I felt different, I felt a burden was off me, to tell you the truth. At first I had a hard time explaining it, it was like missing an arm or a leg, I felt different. It was like a hum, a noise was gone. . . . I felt freer, I felt better—I felt all these things, and I felt different.¹³

That summer, she and Gordon Cook lived in Victoria, British Columbia, while her six-year-old son, Noel, stayed with his father, Manuel Neri, in Benicia. That August, Brown, Cook, Noel, Cook's sons Matthew and Paul, and dogs Rufus and Allen moved to the nearby Sacramento delta region—first to a house at Snug Harbor and then, in January 1970 (after Snug Harbor flooded; fig. 90), to Rio Vista. For Brown, who had lived all of her life in cool, foggy San Francisco, this move to the rural, sunny delta with her husband, their children, and pets must have been another kind of liberation.

Between the spring of 1969 and the spring of 1971 Brown produced a significant number of her finest paintings. The series begins with a large diptych—*Gordon, Joan & Rufus in Front of S.F. Opera House* (cat. no. 40; see previous essay)—and an allegorical landscape—*Chinese Statues Guarding a Delta Landscape* (fig. 82)—both from 1969. It concludes with the autobiographical *Portrait of a Girl* (cat. no. 51, p. 196), painted in the spring of 1971. *The Bride*, which was probably begun in the early spring and finished in the early summer of 1970,¹⁴ is one of the most complex of this very complex series of paintings. Brown's own assessment of *The Bride* is indicated by the fact that it was the painting she submitted to the Centennial Exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute in the winter of 1971. Imposing, hieratic, confidently composed and technically self-assured, *The Bride* is one of Brown's most powerful and enigmatic works.

The visual language of *The Bride* is heavily coded, but its style is simple and straightforward, in keeping with the Rousseau-influenced style that had characterized Brown's work since the fall of 1967, when Gordon Cook gave her a large book on the work of this French primitive artist.¹⁵ *The Bride* was painted with the bright, luminous "Bulletin Colors" of commercial Sherwin-Williams oil enamel that she had first used earlier in 1970 while painting *In Memory of My Father, J. W. Beatty* (cat. no. 42, p. 203).¹⁶ *In Memory of My Father* was also the first time she had used glitter to achieve pictorial richness, a technique she exploited to startling effect in *The Bride*. For Brown, glitter accomplished symbolic as well as technical goals:

Using glitter came about when I started working with enamel and I realized that I missed the thickness of paint. . . . So I wanted another kind of texture there and also I wanted something to reflect more light or light in a different way than the many layers of enamel did. So it just occurred to me to use glitter. I went to the hardware, 10-cent store, and just got a whole lot and found that if I put a lot of layers of verathane over the glitter that it

*stays. . . . Once I started using the glitter, it became kind of a conscious element. . . . of using it to designate cheapness, vulgarity, things like that, so that's part of it too. But that came after using it.*¹⁷

In *The Bride*, glitter gives visual punch to elements of the bride's attire, lends sparkle and mystery to the fur of her cat head, and creates a bristly, glittering halo around the rat crouched along the bottom edge of the picture that pushes him aggressively into the viewer's space. The enamel paint is bright, glossy, and smooth, yet painterly: the artist's touch is visible and clear as handwriting in the discursive strokes that describe the colorful fish in the background and the shorthand lace of the bride's gown.

The Bride was painted on canvas and is large in size—a little over seven and one-half by four and one-half feet.¹⁸ The size, frontal composition, bright colors, and aggressive surface of the painting—along with the unnerving stares of the cat, rat, and fish—create an effect of unsettling intensity. *The Bride* confronts us as viewers and challenges us to engage with her on intellectual and spiritual as well as visual and sensual terms. These are Joan Brown's terms, the terms she set for herself. Those who wish to engage, to discover for themselves the meaning of *The Bride* must explore her multivalent symbolism with a curious mind, an open heart, and a sense of humor, for humor was a consistent element in Brown's work.

The Bride comprises five main pictorial elements: the bride herself; her rat, which is attached to her wrist by a leash; her cat head; the field of poppies in which she stands; and various colorful fish floating in the sky or water (it is unclear which) above the poppies. "This is a painting where everything just evolved," Brown laughingly told an audience for one of her slide lectures. "I was doing a series of paintings of Adam and Eve and all of this sort of thing, and it started out as a nude in the center, dead center, of Eve, and then it went from there. . . . It went through a lot of changes; I worked on it for about three months."¹⁹ Among other things, *The Bride* is a personal Garden of Eden. A characteristic of depictions of the Garden of Eden is an abundance of plants and animals. In *The Bride*, the poppies and fish evoke the flora and fauna of Brown's own paradise in the Sacramento delta. Even the rat has a domestic prototype: *A Mouse in Snug Harbor*, signed and dated "Joan Cook 12/10/69" (cat. no. 41, p. 206).

Other paintings from this time on the theme of the Garden of Eden include *Paradise Series #1: Eve with Fish & Snakes* (cat. no. 47, p. 223); *Seascape in the Garden of Eden*, with its leaping fish, preying birds, and serpent border (fig. 83); and *Devil Standing on Fish* (cat. no. 46,



FIG. 82. Joan Brown. *Chinese Statues Guarding a Delta Landscape*, 1969.



FIG. 83. Joan Brown. *Seascape in the Garden of Eden*, 1970.

p. 222). All of Brown's Eden paintings feature fish, which had very personal meanings for her, as we shall see. Although only a small part of the canonical Garden of Eden story, the fish is a universal symbol for Christ. Brown was reared Roman Catholic and attended Catholic schools throughout her girlhood. The Christian tradition of Mary as the new Eve, the bride of Christ, who subdued the Devil, may hover somewhere within the confident catbride, surrounded by her fish, who has tamed the rat.

The ultimate source of the bride's power, as we shall see, is her serene balance of innocence and experience, her openness both to life and to knowledge of even the darkest truth. This dual quality also links *The Bride* with the traditional theme of the Garden of Eden, for in Eden Eve was tempted by the serpent to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, fruit that God had warned her not to taste. Surely Joan Brown would have empathized with Eve, for from an early age she was an avid seeker of knowledge of all kinds, and of experience in the fullest sense of that word.

The paper-doll dress of the bride refers in a rather literal way to the fantasies of childhood—specifically girlhood. Recalling her childhood, Brown told an interviewer, "I spent a lot of time making paper dolls, which I've never thought of, but which now kind of hits home as I spend a lot of time painting or making my own world."²⁰

This paper-doll world was one of Brown's "compensations" for her unhappy life at home with her parents and grandmother:

My mother was something like thirty-eight when I was born, and my dad was five years older. And my grandmother was living there. But it was a crazy situation, and my mother continued to work for a few years after I was born, until she got sick and developed epilepsy. Mostly it was an emotional disorder. What had happened was that my mother, never having wanted a family life all of a sudden found herself with one, but would never buy a house. So I was raised in a three-room apartment with my mother, my father, and my grandmother. . . . My mother didn't want the responsibility of the house, and my father didn't want to take a stand and put up with my mother. . . . I absolutely hated that environment. It was dark, I mean dark in the psychological way, and it was crazy.²¹

For Brown's mother, a move from their small Marina apartment²² would have meant acknowledging the fact that she was responsible for a family and particularly for a child—something that she was apparently incapable of doing. She thus seems to have repeated the pattern set by her own mother, Brown's grandmother, who took to her bed more or less permanently after her husband was killed

trying to jump a train in an attempt to join his wife and daughter in San Francisco following the 1906 earthquake. Brown's mother would have been four years old at the time; she cared for her mother for most of her life. As for Brown's father, he seems to have assumed the role of the child in the family, while Brown became, by default, the mother:

*He drank himself into a stupor almost every night, which I don't blame him for one single bit. My dad and I were always very close; I was very sympathetic, very protective. My mother would fight him up and down and I'd jump in and I'd protect him constantly. He was rather helpless in any situation that needed action, and my grandmother was bedridden most of the time, crippled with arthritis. So very often I would have to take over a situation when my mother was sick, you know, with epileptic attacks—and that would happen any time during the night. It's only been in the last five or six years [since her parents' death] that I can sleep soundly at night, because I was always alert, waiting for this. And in this tiny environment, three rooms, you can hear the slightest disturbance. So it was a very tense life.*²³

The chaotic physical and emotional environment of Brown's childhood was surely a factor in her early search for and lifelong belief in a containing metaphysical reality.²⁴ Later in her life, Brown came to regard her difficult childhood as a kind of gift:

*I think my life with both my mother and father was a very gift-giving kind of situation, as painful and as negative as it may sound. . . . My father taught me a great deal about gentleness, which is something that did not develop that much in my own personality. I felt you always had to come out fighting. . . . Sometimes I'll stop, put on the brakes, and try and connect to that again rather than rushing through. For me, this was a great gift. The other gift, from my mother's side, I feel, is that I knew I didn't want to either live like that or end up like that—wanting something and yet thinking I couldn't do a damn thing about it. . . . Her utter failure in coping with her goals, fantasies, desires, and more important, her actual situation, was a great gift to me, in terms of being able to take action.*²⁵

Learning to take action was how Brown distinguished herself from both her mother and her father; it was how she grew up.²⁶

The *Portrait of a Girl* (cat. no. 51), painted in the spring of 1971, was the last of the series of major paintings Brown

produced around 1970. The girl is based on several family photographs of Brown from the age of about two to five years old. The head is taken from an undated, hand-colored photo of Brown in a pink dress and hair ribbon (fig. 84). The dress and body are from a black-and-white photo labeled on the back: "Joan Beatty age 5 yrs." (fig. 85). The flower in the right hand of the child in the painting is taken from a black-and-white photo inscribed, "Joan Vivien Beatty October 1940 2 yrs. 9 mos." In this poignant photograph a sad-looking Joan holds out a rose toward the photographer (fig. 86). The Chinese characters and ferocious Chinese dragon in the background of the painting were taken from illustrations in a well-used two-volume set of books on Chinese art and history in Brown's library. The caption for the dragon in volume two reads: "The five-clawed feet of the dragon identify him as a symbol of the emperor, the Son of Heaven. . . ." (fig. 87).²⁷

When Brown was young she was friends with a Chinese boy (a fact she hid from her parents), and she enjoyed "experiencing" Chinese food with him.²⁸ Brown was particularly influenced by Chinese culture in the summer of 1969, when she taught at the University of Victoria in Victoria, Canada:

They had a one-block Chinatown, but what a Chinatown! They had a lot of things there from Red China, and the only things we had seen were just the junk from around [San Francisco]. . . . There was a curious duality between "funky" roughness and elegance



FIG. 84. Joan Brown in pink dress and hair ribbon at age two, 1940.



CAT. NO. 51. *Portrait of a Girl*, 1971.



FIG. 85 (above left).
Joan Brown at age five, 1943.



FIG. 86 (above right).
Joan Brown at age two years,
nine months, October 1940.

FIG. 87 (right).
Chinese dragon from Joan Brown's
copy of *The Horizon History of China*
(American Heritage Publishing Co.,
New York, 1969, vol. 2, p. 73).



*which really attracted me. It was very, very sophisticated and yet very raw too. There is a funny duality there too in the color and pattern. I became very interested in pattern, and it was a huge influence.*²⁹

Chinese culture not only attracted Brown visually, but also represented the beautiful and the exotic, the enticing "other" that was everything her life at home had not been.

Like *The Bride*, the young Joan Beatty in *Portrait of a Girl* confronts us in a central, frontal, though less self-confident, way. While the bride's gaze is straightforward and steady, that of a confident cat, the young Joan appears determined but a little fearful. In her right hand she holds a pink rose, symbol of love and affection.³⁰ Her left hand is hidden defensively behind her back, as though she is hiding something she does not want us to know she has. The child Joan stands, feet planted wide,³¹ on a glossy black floor that contains a snakelike reflection of the frightening and tantalizingly exotic Chinese dragon that threatens her from behind. Her dominance of the snake-like reflection is reminiscent of the earlier painting, *Paradise Series #1: Eve with Fish & Snakes* (cat. no. 47, p. 223), and may allude to Brown's conquering of her childhood demons. A tamed dragon can become a protector, like the Chinese guardians of the moonlit delta in another earlier painting (fig. 82). Whatever meanings this dragon may hold, he surely represents above all Joan Brown's own indomitable spirit and her true lineage: daughter of heaven. Small, vulnerable, yet determined, this child is the spiritual mother of the triumphant *Bride*.

What is the *Bride's* source of power? The most notable sign of her power is the large, cowering rat on a leash at the bride's feet. The rat was Brown's most consistent and pervasive image. Rats appear in some of her earliest works and reappear often, frequently as protagonists in her pictorial dramas. According to her son, Noel Neri, Brown was frightened of rats, a phobia that persisted throughout her life. Given her action-oriented personality, it should not be surprising to observe her engaging in the counterphobic behavior of repeatedly depicting the source of her fear in order to tame it. In a 1982 interview, Brown described the rat as "the ominous, dark, frightening image that I've used on and on for years."³² What, for Joan Brown, might this particular rat have represented? Other examples of her rat imagery may help us begin to answer this question.

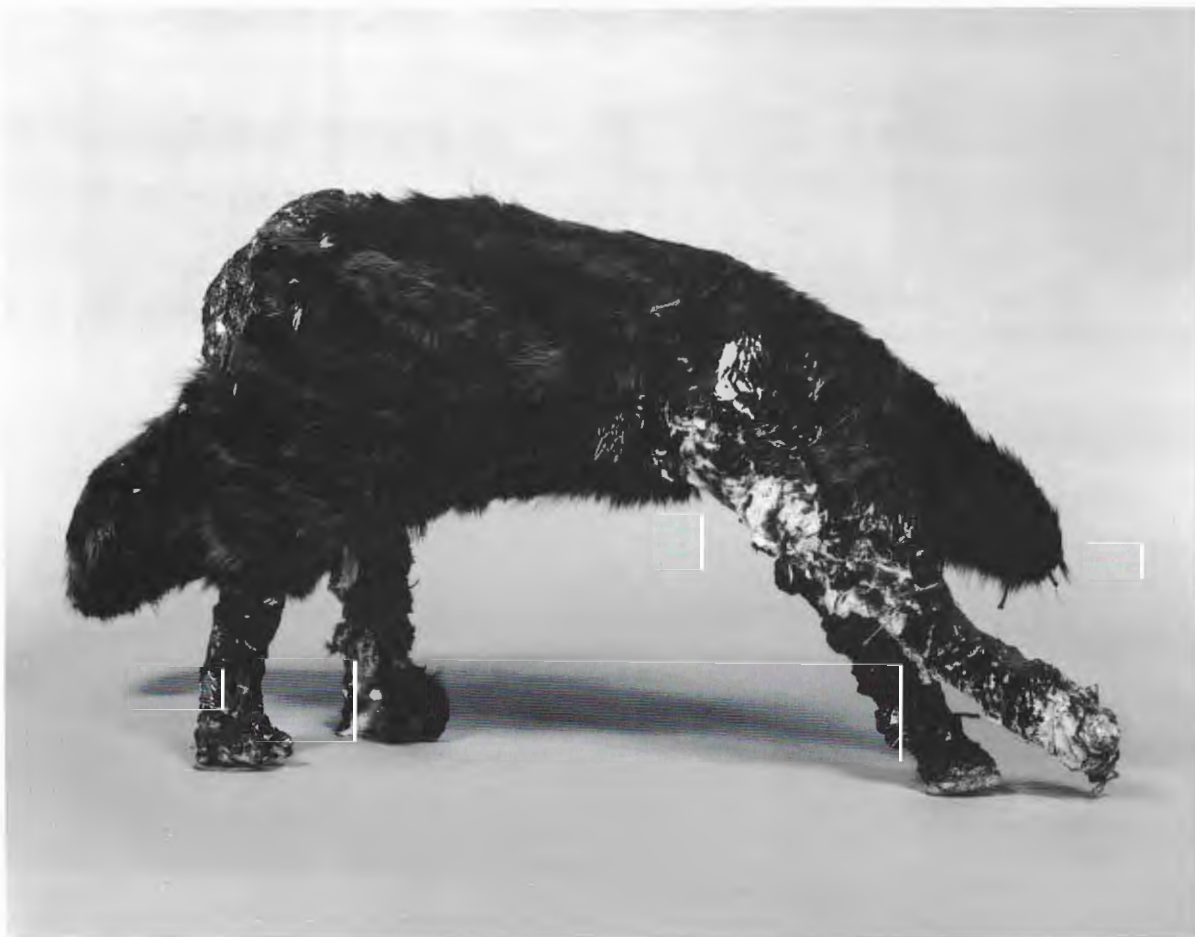
Fur Rat from 1962 is perhaps the most powerful and certainly the most genuinely frightening of Brown's rat images (cat. no. 25). Constructed of wood, chicken wire,

plaster, string, nails, and raccoon fur, *Fur Rat* is large—over four and one-half feet long and one and one-half feet tall. (It is, in fact, almost exactly the size of the rat in *The Bride*.) Its fur is matted with plaster and, though its bottom is quite bald, its tail is furry and studded with hidden nails. This rat's lineage goes back to Brown's wrapped sculpture of a bird (cat. no. 3, p. 23), which mimicked the ancient Egyptian practice of mummification. Even before the young Joan Beatty began reading about Egypt, she was morbidly fascinated by mummies:

*For many years, as a child, I used to be stuck going to these hideous concerts out in Golden Gate Park with my father, my grandmother, my mother. . . . I just hated it. All these old people would talk about illnesses and stuff. . . . My dad would say he was going to go watch the ball game, and he'd cut across the park over to Ninth Avenue and go to the Little Shamrock where he had a bunch of Irish drinking buddies, over there on Sunday afternoons. So I would go to the de Young Museum. And [stare at] that mummy, that one dumb, stupid, ratty, rotten mummy. . . .*³³

The use of the word "ratty" as an adjective—popular slang in the 1950s and 1960s—was linked in Brown's conversation with specific kinds of images. The de Young mummy with whom she spent lonely Sunday afternoons was "ratty" and rotten. Her parents "wore the rattiest kind of cheap clothes you could ever imagine."³⁴ Tomb or apartment, both contained a kind of mummified existence. The studio was a place where she could combat rattiness: "What a mess there! Rotten old paint cans around and the rattiest brushes. Then it's fascinating and challenging to gather up tools in this mess . . . and try to create some order in it. It's my kind of order. . . . I have some control."³⁵ For Brown, rattiness was linked with rottenness and, by extension, death. Art was a weapon against death—manifested both in the Egyptians' creation of sensual and spiritual beauty from death, and in her own powers of creation.

In this sense, the rat is a universal symbol: the rat's tendency to infest human habitations, its dirty color, and its reputation for carrying plague associate it with disease and death; while its fur coat and disturbingly naked, snakelike tail link it with sex. A rat in a dream can be an image of something that is repulsive or sexually obscene to the dreamer, or it can represent a morbid outlook. Brown herself had a vivid dream of a rat, a dream that she recorded in a dark, murky drawing from 1959: *Rat Dream #1* (cat. no. 7; scenes from this or other rat dreams are represented in cat. nos. 8 and 9, pp. 200–201). Brown told



CAT. NO. 25. *Fur Rat*, 1962.



CAT. NO. 7. *Rat Dream #1*, 1959.



CAT. NO. 8 (above).
Rat Dream #2, 1959.



CAT. NO. 9 (left).
Rat Dream #3, 1959.



FIG. 88. Joan Brown in raccoon coat and hat. Photograph by Wallace Berman, inscribed on verso: "1957 [sic]/SHOW AT SPATSA GALLERY." (Brown's show at the Spatsa Gallery was in 1958.)



FIG. 89. Sergeant John W. Beatty in Siberia, ca. 1914–18.

author Caroline Jones about this dream, in which a rat "appeared to her on the kitchen sink, its luxurious pelt extending to a long, bushy tail. Only when she stroked the tail in the dream did she discover the sharp nails concealed within the soft fur."³⁶

The sexual implications of this dream are unmistakable and complex. The kitchen is the locus of domesticity. The dream-rat's tail is not naked—it is covered with tempting fur, which harbors hurtful nails. Two photographs in Brown's personal collection of family photographs may help shed light on the meaning of this image. The first is a photograph postmarked 1959 that Wallace Berman sent her, showing Brown at a show at the Spatsa Gallery in 1958 seductively enveloped in the raccoon fur hat and coat she later transformed into *Fur Rat* (fig. 88). Another photograph, from some forty years earlier, shows Brown's father in similar garb and in a similar setting, complete with painted backdrop (fig. 89). The photograph is a souvenir of John Beatty's service in Siberia during World War I. Brown's identification with her father, in particular this youthful,³⁷ relatively glamorous father who served in Siberia, is manifested in *In Memory of My Father, J. W. Beatty*, 1970 (cat. no. 42), the centerpiece of which is a wooden box inscribed: "SGT. JOHN W. BEATTY / (887214) / A.E.F. SIBERIA / FEB. 5, 1897–JAN. 21, 1969." In a discussion of this painting, Brown explained the significance of the box: "He had been in the First World War, in Vladivostok, and he had guardhouse duty or something, but made friends with these German prisoners, and when he left, they made him that wooden box as a gift."³⁸ A snapshot from Brown's collection shows this box on top of a pile of objects that appear to have been rescued from the flood in Snug Harbor (fig. 90). Her dog Allen is standing in the water as though guarding these objects. He is reproduced verbatim to the left of the box in the painting. Once we know the dog is standing in flooded water, other elements of the painting achieve added symbolic richness. The seagull with the shamrock³⁹ in its beak becomes a poignant reference to the biblical story of Noah and the flood, in which a dove returning with a sprig of green foliage represents the promise of new life following devastation. The salmon in the surrounding border become symbols of regeneration.

Brown resembled her father physically. Like him, she was small—"He [was] a very small man . . . smaller than I am"⁴⁰—and they shared rather pointed, one might even say ratlike, facial features. She was also more or less named after him: her father and mother's names were John and Vivien Beatty; they named their daughter Joan Vivien Beatty.



CAT. NO. 42 (above).
In Memory of My Father,
 J. W. Beatty, 1970.

FIG. 90 (right). Allen the dog
 in the flood, Snug Harbor, California,
 ca. early January 1970.





FIG. 91. Joan Brown. *Family Tree*, in Noel Neri's baby book, 1962.

It is likely that not even Joan Brown could have sorted out the affectional, sexual, narcissistic, and morbid implications of her rat dream and, by extension, the *Fur Rat*. Nor would she have wanted to, for her power came from her unconscious:

Unlike a lot of people, or people I know, I trust the unconscious very, very strongly. And I don't trust my conscious, my mind is a mess. It just looks like this painting table. It's just filled with nonsense, sidetracking, garbage and crap. But in my unconscious are the ideas I get for painting, from nothing very clear or precise — my dreams. I'm a great believer in dreams. I pay a great deal of attention to them, and follow them in my everyday life very strongly.⁴¹

Presumably, Brown had the rat dream in 1959—the date inscribed on the drawings (cat. nos. 7–9, pp. 200–201). *Fur Rat* was done in 1962. What was it about the year 1962 that caused her, three years later, to create a large-scale, three-dimensional, tactile replica of the rat in her dream?

Nineteen sixty-two was the year Brown learned she was pregnant: her son, Noel, was born in August of that year. For Joan Brown, the experience of motherhood was extremely positive; in motherhood as in everything else,

Brown seemed determined to reverse the family curse of apathy and depression. But it is likely that the experience of pregnancy and the prospect of becoming a mother elicited angry feelings toward her own mother—the mother who had never wanted or accepted her⁴²—along with accompanying feelings of guilt and fear of abandonment. Brown probably made the *Fur Rat* before Noel's birth, sometime during the spring or summer of 1962, during her pregnancy. She may well have felt a particularly strong need at this time to exorcise the “ominous, dark, frightening” dream-image of the fur rat, an image that received much of its power from unconscious feelings of attraction toward her father, hatred toward her mother, and fears of isolation and death.⁴³

One of the most interesting objects in Noel Neri's collection of his mother's work is his own baby book, which Brown seems to have worked on somewhat obsessively soon after his birth on August 20, 1962, and updated regularly until Noel was eight or nine years old. This standard-issue early 1960s baby book was heavily customized by Brown: the sentimental drawings decorating the book were transformed by her into portraits of Noel, caricatures of the family's pets (Bob the Dog is ubiquitous), and other idiosyncratic images. Even rats appear—only once, but

in quantity: they cavort through a ribbon-bedecked “Family Tree” of Brown’s own devising on a page on which “Mom’s side” of Noel’s family—Brown’s parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents—is listed in some detail (fig. 91). In contrast, “Dad’s side” of the family lists only Manuel’s mother and father, despite the fact that Brown was on good terms with her mother-in-law, Guadalupe “Lupe” Neri, of whom she painted a sensitive portrait (cat. no. 22, p. 69). It is likely that Brown spent considerable time talking with her father, mother, and grandmother around the time of the birth of her son, for her family history on this page is replete with crossings-out and fillings-in of information.⁴⁴ In the process of researching the names and exact birth dates of her forebears, of talking with her parents and grandmother about their own parents and about their youth, Brown must have gained a richer understanding of the people who had caused her so much pain.

The “Family Tree” is decorated much like the Christmas tree Brown created for her son’s first Christmas, a tree that Brown liberally draped with wide ribbons of candy-dotted paper (fig. 92), and which she documented in a major painting, *Noel’s First Christmas* (cat. no. 28, p. 207). Christmas was an important holiday for Brown; it represented a ritual time when animosities were put aside and harmony reigned.⁴⁵ Presumably, the birth of a baby ought to be another such occasion for harmony and celebration. Brown named her baby “Noel” after the holiday. And although the “Family Tree” was not the first time Brown depicted rats in a light-hearted fashion (see cat. no. 10), it is notable that, in Noel’s baby book, Brown’s rat-infested family tree is thoroughly celebratory in nature.

A *Mouse in Snug Harbor* (cat. no. 41) was done only a few months before *The Bride*, in December 1969. Although its direction is reversed, the mouse’s pose is virtually identical to that of the rat in *The Bride*. It is painted with a heavier impasto than the rest of the painting, emphasizing its three-dimensionality, much like the rat’s glitter in *The Bride*. The mouse crouches on a black rug with pink flowers that is similar to the black, flowered ground plane of *The Bride*. The stylized leaves of the obsessively patterned wallpaper, in the same position as the fish in *The Bride*, evoke the shape of external female genitals. About her use of pattern, Brown told an interviewer in 1982: “I haven’t used any patterns for a while now, in the sense of the orderly, formal kind of patterns I was using. . . . When I did use them, it was because I did feel a kind of need, a compulsion to have that kind of order in pictures. I felt better after I put them all in.”⁴⁶ Psychologically,



FIG. 92. Joan Brown and Noel Neri at Christmas 1962, in Noel Neri’s baby book.



CAT. NO. 10. *Rats on Fingers*, 1959.



CAT. NO. 41. *A Mouse in Snug Harbor*, 1969.



CAT. NO. 28. *Noel's First Christmas*, 1963.

rodents represented a threat to Brown's fundamental sense of self. *A Mouse in Snug Harbor* is on one level a scene from her domestic life. On another level it is an effort to tame a phobia. On yet another level it is a highly controlled attempt to resolve long-standing psychological issues, issues that were more programmatically, though perhaps no more consciously, defined in *The Bride*.

The rat appears in another painting closely related to *The Bride*: a square *Self-Portrait* with symbolic figures in the background that was painted at about the same time (cat. no. 43). This is a key work, for it alerts us to Brown's strongly iconographic program, and it presages the even more programmatically symbolical self-portraits of 1983 (cat. nos. 110–14). This smaller self-portrait picks up and repeats several features of *The Bride*. Near the right edge, the paper-doll dress from *The Bride* is attached to a figure with Brown's head, confirming that the cat-bride is indeed a self-portrait. To the lower left of the bride there is a cat, and fish are scattered among the other objects, as though they had somehow tumbled from the background of *The Bride* into the background of the *Self-Portrait*. Only one of these images actually intrudes into the artist's own space: the gray rat that crouches on her left shoulder, its tail caressing her throat. It is like a malevolent guardian angel; or devil, to use Garden-of-Eden imagery—the Devil was a fallen angel, after all.⁴⁷

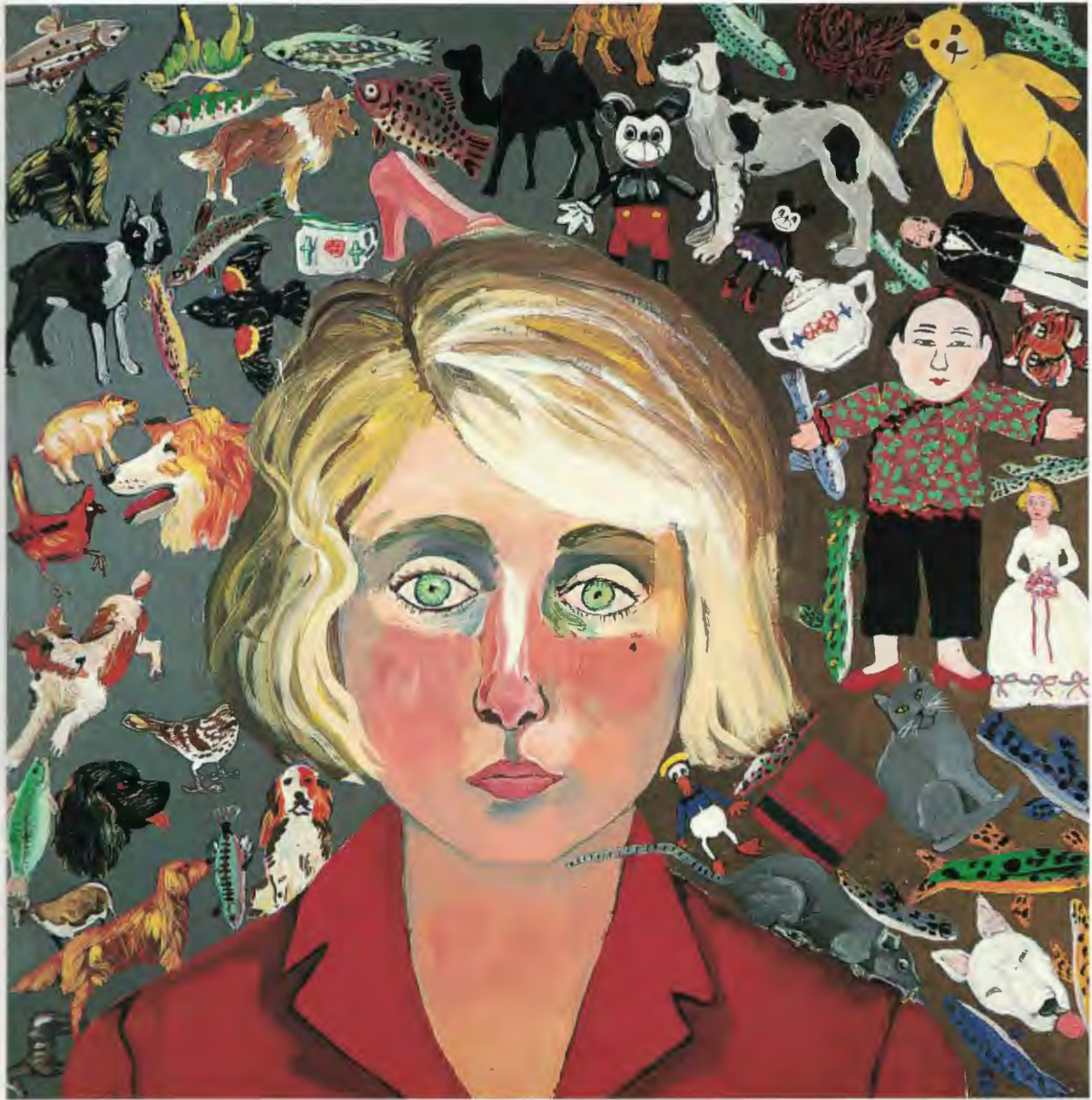
In Brown's later work, rats are most frequently associated both with partying, in particular dancing and heavy drinking, and with death, in the form of skeletons. Often both themes are combined. *The Last Dance* from 1973 (cat. no. 62, p. 210) makes explicit what is implicit in many of Brown's Dancer paintings: the unconscious foreknowledge of death that drives the urge to merge with another. Three couples dance in various states of intimacy and ecstasy, oblivious to the three rats creeping up from beneath to swallow them whole—the fate of a fourth couple, who are in the process of disappearing headfirst into the maw of a large, sharp-toothed rat. The composition is flanked, left and right, by a skeleton in evening wear observing the scene, and by a skeleton dancing with a rat whose disturbingly naked tail trails off into the lower right-hand corner of the composition. The overall composition and several details of this painting are reminiscent of Edvard Munch's *Dance of Life* (fig. 93), which is in fact a dance of death. The message is the same: love and death are complements, two sides of the same coin. Munch believed that one is intimately linked with the other. Brown wished only to remind herself and us (humorously but fiercely) that one inevitably follows the other. The sexual instinct

as an expression of the death instinct was one of the implications of Brown's "fur rat" dream, and it is also a primary component of the rat symbolism in *The Bride*. *The Bride*'s rat represents the base instincts, instincts that the bride has tamed and now controls, just as Brown the artist tamed her "ratty" brushes to create art.

As she grew older, Brown's continuing researches into spirituality and metaphysics brought her to increasing levels of comfort with the darker side of existence. In 1977, inspired in part by Paul Brunton's book, *A Search in Secret Egypt*, she traveled to Egypt to finally experience the ghosts of a culture that had fascinated her since childhood. *The Final Observation* of 1977 (fig. 94) was one of many works Brown created as a result of her Egypt trip. Like other works from this extensive series, *The Final Observation* is infused with obvious humor, a quality that leavens its heavy message.⁴⁸

In this diptych, a decorous Brown and her male companion observe a pair of heavily drinking rats who are seemingly unaware of the skeleton behind them laying a bony, proprietary hand on each of their shoulders. An ancient Egyptian ankh—a symbol of immortality—hangs from Brown's arm in much the same way the rat's leash does in *The Bride*. Egyptian figures and symbols decorate the backgrounds of both parts of the diptych, but those on the left-hand, rat side are in disarray, while those on the right-hand, Brown side express celebration and worship. Clearly, Brown and her companion are associated with cosmic order, while the drinking rats are literally disorderly—they have knocked over a bottle of wine and a bottle of aquavit. Despite their natty dress, their attitude and behavior are ratty. Brown and her friend watch in dismay: they know that the rats, ignorant or uncaring of spiritual truth, are already dead.

In addition to representing a careless approach to life, the disorderly rats in *The Final Observation* represent Brown's own shadow-self, the dark side of her nature that she learned to recognize and integrate as she grew older.⁴⁹ Similarly, the rat in *The Bride*, like the rat on Brown's shoulder in *Self-Portrait*, is an attribute of the bride herself, an aspect of her own psyche. Brown's humor, her sense of play, is manifest in all three works. In *The Bride*, the dark passions are held in check by the power of the bride, a power symbolized by the pulchritude of the bride's body and costume at her moment of feminine apotheosis. Despite the quality of caricature in the bride's nubile breasts and her paper-doll wedding dress, for Brown, she was a symbol of that "certain funny ritual . . . where



CAT. NO. 43. *Self-Portrait*, 1970.



CAT. NO. 62 (above).
The Last Dance, 1973.

FIG. 93 (right). Edvard Munch.
Dance of Life, 1899–1900.

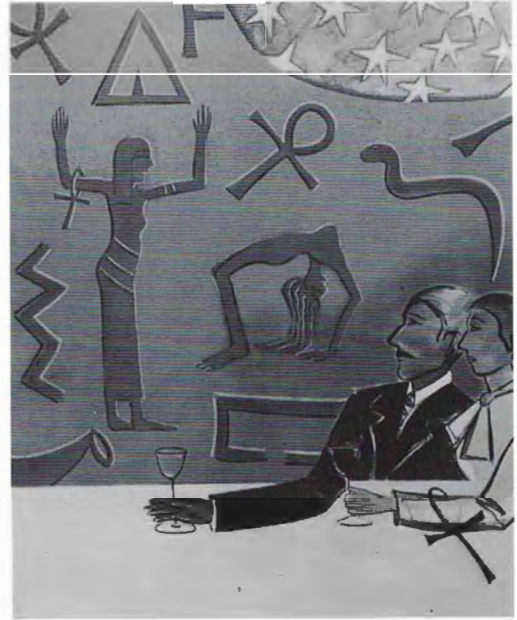




CAT. NO. 61. *New Year's Eve Dance #1*, 1972.



FIG. 94. Joan Brown.
The Final Observation, 1977.



something happens,” something that allowed for “growth and the exchange that can take place with a close relationship.”⁵⁰ The innocence of the bride, her openness and willingness to connect, are an important source of her power.

The only power worth having is power over oneself, and the bride’s innocence is balanced by the confident, knowing stare of her cat’s eyes. A cat is anything but innocent. A related image by Brown is *Woman Wearing Mask* from 1972 (cat. no. 55), in which a woman confronts us boldly, wearing sexy black underwear, red shoes, and a cat mask. This image elicits common associations with cats as predators and as amoral sexual creatures. But the undressed woman in *Woman Wearing Mask* is wearing her cat nature as a mask for the benefit of the viewer, as part of her costume. We sense that it is one of many possible personas—this woman is playing at being a cat. In contrast, the cat-bride of *The Bride* is neither a woman wearing a cat mask, nor a cat dressed up as a bride. She is a true hybrid.

Although she painted a great many dogs, which she generally associated with her father,⁵¹ Brown identified with cats. “I think the cat is an alter ego,” Brown told an audience in 1985. “I use the cat frequently. The cat is like an androgynous being, it’s neither male nor female and

it’s both, but I think it’s an alter-ego.”⁵² This androgynous quality of the cat partly accounts for the disturbing nature of *The Bride*. She is more alley cat than pussy cat, and the masculine directness of her cat head contradicts the softness of the round-breasted female body to which it is attached. The contradiction within Brown herself between stereotypically masculine and feminine qualities—her “male” forcefulness of character and her “female” spirituality—led her to conduct lifelong researches into philosophies that stressed the integral nature of masculine and feminine, such as that of Akhenaton’s Egypt and the Chinese concept of yin and yang. In a 1985 lecture, Brown claimed that “every ancient culture has used the duality, the male/female principle, making up the sum total, this now being a principle existing within the individual.”⁵³ In *The Bride*, Brown is, among other things, advocating the complementary rather than the contradictory nature of masculine and feminine qualities within a single being.

Joan Brown referred to her cat-bride as a sphinx.⁵⁴ The Egyptian sphinx prototype has the body of a cat and the head of a human, but the reversal we see in *The Bride* was also common, both in Egyptian art⁵⁵ and in Brown’s work. In 1967, for example, Brown did a painting on paper in which complementary sphinx-types are paired: a loudly



CAT. NO. 55. *Woman Wearing Mask*, 1972.



CAT. NO. 37. *Man & Tiger*, 1967.

dressed man has the head of a tiger, while a tiger has the "head of a sensitive man" (cat. no. 37). The meaning of this drawing may be no more complex than a witty visual play on the animal qualities of contrasting human personalities—a poet with the heart of a tiger, and a flashy dresser with a predator's mind. Or it may simply be a contemporary rendering of a description of an Egyptian monument Brown found in one of her books.⁵⁶ "The sphinx," Brown asserted in a 1987 lecture, "has fascinated me for longer than I can remember. . . . What the sphinx means in every ancient culture is the higher and the lower self joined together; the animal and the human living together in harmony, not separate—non-dualism."⁵⁷ For Brown, the sphinx represented a wholesome balance between our human and our animal natures. Humans are associated with intellect; animals, especially cats, with instinct. It is desirable to balance intellect with instinct, as Brown tried to do in working "from both the conscious and unconscious states, hoping for a balance of both."⁵⁸

For Brown, animals were by no means inferior to humans. In fact, sometimes the opposite was the case, as in Brown's large, allegorical self-portrait of 1983, *Year of the Tiger* (cat. no. 111). The tiger was Brown's Chinese astrological symbol. (The cat in *The Bride* is a tiger cat.) In *Year of the Tiger*, it is represented along with the other Chinese astrological symbols in a wheel at the upper right. Below the tiger is a drawing of one of Brown's self-chosen patron saints: the athletic Egyptian goddess Nut, who holds up the heavens. To the left of center are two constellations, Aquarius and Leo, representing Brown's birth sign and her rising sign. Brown herself stands at the center, a pensive look in her eyes. Dressed in her painting clothes, her paintbrush in hand, she contemplates her future and the worthiness of her motives. Over her head and over the heads of two cats on pedestals flanking the composition are "thought-forms" taken from a book of that title by theosophists Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater that explicates the meaning of shapes seen over people's heads in various emotional situations by unspecified clairvoyants.⁵⁹ The pink curved form over the left-hand cat represents "affection," while the blue, cone-shaped form over the head of the right-hand cat signifies "devotion." The more complicated yellow/orange hooked form over Brown's own head represents "high ambition." According to Besant and Leadbeater, this form is by no means totally negative:

The ambitious quality is shown by the rich deep orange color, and the desire by the hooked extensions which precede the forms as it moves. The thought is a good

*and pure one of its kind. . . . If this man coveted place or power, it was not for his own sake, but from the conviction that he could do the work well and truly, and to the advantage of his fellow-men.*⁶⁰

Brown seems to be examining her motives as an artist in this important year—the year of her Chinese astrological animal, the Tiger; the forty-fifth year of her life. Two years after making this painting, she told an audience for a slide lecture, "The [form] over my head still has some hooks into it. It starts out as an altruistic thought form, but it comes back into the ego. . . . The cats have good ones. The cats are home free there, but I'm still hooked in."⁶¹ For Brown, the cat was an integrated, balanced creature, a creature to emulate. *Harmony* (cat. no. 108, p. 217), from 1982, forms a kind of coda to *The Bride*. In *Harmony*, Brown's human, intellectual powers, linked with the sun and with consciousness, and her catlike instinctual powers, linked with the moon and with the unconscious, are shown in perfect balance. Ironically, *Harmony*, with its literal symbolism, feels more heavily weighted toward Brown's conscious mind. It is a less interesting and effective painting than *The Bride*, whose multivalent images are resonant with the mysteries of the unconscious.

The fish in the upper background portion of *The Bride* are in some ways the simplest, in other ways the most challenging symbolic component of this painting. Cats like to eat fish, just as they like to catch rodents, so it does not seem particularly strange to see fish as well as a rat in this cat's realm. But when we begin to look at other works featuring fish that Brown produced around this time, the possible meanings of these fish multiply as mysteriously as the fish in the New Testament miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

Asked about the fish in the background of *The Bride* during a 1975 lecture, Brown said, "I did numerous fish at that time; we were living on the delta right on the water, and the kids would fish off our dock and we were constantly surrounded by fish one way or another."⁶² Brown's son does not remember fishing in Rio Vista, but he does remember his mother frequently bringing home fish from the market in order to paint them. At the beginning of 1970, Brown, attesting to her obsessive interest in this traditional still-life subject, painted a number of still lifes of fish. Major paintings from 1970 that feature fish include, in addition to the Eden pictures mentioned earlier, the painting in memory of her father, which has a fish border (cat. no. 42, p. 203); a large portrait of herself with her arm around an over-life-size fish (cat. no. 49, p. 224); and *The*



CAT. NO. 111. *Year of the Tiger*, 1983.



CAT. NO. 108. *Harmony*, 1982.

Mermaid (cat. no. 45, p. 220), which is also a self-portrait. (Although the mermaid is black, she has Brown's green eyes and trademark beauty mark on her cheek.)

Someone who depicted herself embracing a fish and as a mermaid clearly identified with fish or, perhaps more accurately, identified fish with something about herself. On one level, this is not complicated: Brown loved being in the water. She told Paul Karlstrom in 1975 that during her unhappy childhood she "spent an awful lot of time in the water and on the beach, which I have returned to in the last six or seven years."⁶³ The exhilarating contrast between her parents' dark, claustrophobic apartment and the bright, open water of San Francisco Bay must have been an important part of the appeal of swimming when she was young.

Swimming may also have satisfied a need to master the primal element of water. Both as a child and as an adult, Brown swam at Aquatic Park, with its dangerous currents and its proximity to the Golden Gate Bridge, which her mother had repeatedly threatened to "go off," as well as Alcatraz Island, with its evocative prison.⁶⁴ Among the important changes in Brown's life in the year 1969 was a return to regular swimming. Although she lived in the delta, which presumably had plenty of places to swim, Brown returned to swim from Aquatic Park, where she had swum as a child. Certainly, mastery was fundamental to her attitude toward swimming, for she swam competitively, and in the early 1970s she became a student of the Olympic swimming coach Charlie Sava, who was an important mentor for her as well (see cat. no. 69, p. 118).⁶⁵

For Brown, swimming was a meditative act as well as a physical activity.⁶⁶ Water is a universal symbol for the unconscious, and fish are equated with its contents: we speak, for example, of "fishing for ideas." On one level, the fish in *The Bride* represent the prey of the cat in just this sense: the products of Brown's imagination that nourished her art. That these fish may exist in the mind of the bride is indicated by the fact that they swim in an indeterminate blue field behind her in the upper half of the picture. Are they swimming in water, as we would expect, or in the sky, as implied by their position above a field of flowers and by their diminution in size as they approach the horizon? This quandary reminds us of the imaginative experience of lying on our backs on the ground and visualizing the sky, not as a ceiling of blue, but as a sea of infinite depth, with the earth as an ocean floor. There is a timeless quality to this sensation, as we return in our imagination to the beginning stages of evolution and breathe water as if it were ether, like our ancestors, the fish.

Water also symbolizes rebirth, a return to the watery world of the amniotic fluid in which we were first formed.

This is one meaning, for example, of the Christian ritual of baptism. Because of their many eggs, fish are symbols of fertility, which in psychological terms means a promise of personal growth and, in personal terms, of generation—the power of creativity. In Brown's large painting *A New Age: The Bolti Fish*, which she also called *Transformation* (cat. no. 116), the fish carries both meanings. Here the artist shows herself standing in the mouth of a large colorful fish, holding a paintbrush in her hand. Brown's visual model for this image was a reproduction of a fifteenth-century Persian manuscript painting of Jonah and the Whale (fig. 95). Stubborn Jonah tried to avoid God's order to go and preach to the sinful inhabitants of Nineveh. He was thrown off the ship on which he was fleeing, and spent three days and nights contemplating his willfulness in the belly of a whale. The fish vomited him up safely on dry land, and he eventually went on to fulfill God's command. *Transformation* was painted in 1984, the year following Brown's pivotal year of self-questioning—a spiritual and professional crisis that produced several major paintings, including *Questions & Answers* and *Year of the Tiger* (cat. nos. 110, 111; pp. 164, 216). There are overtones of the Jonah story in *Transformation*, as an expression of Brown's resolve, after her year of self-doubt, to make her work her spiritual practice.

About the fish in *Transformation*, Brown told an audience:

*In Egypt in the eighteenth dynasty [the period of Akhenaton] there were fish in the river, in the Nile, called Bolti. And these fish hatched their eggs in their mouth. It was looked upon as a symbol of reincarnation and of transformation. . . . And it was a sacred image. So I thought this was fitting. It's a fish and it's a little self portrait with a paintbrush in its hand.*⁶⁷

Brown's account of the Egyptian fish that hatched their eggs in their mouths is related to the story of Jonah. It may be related as well to a version of the Egyptian myth of Osiris that Brown surely would have known. After Osiris was torn in pieces and his body scattered by his brother Set, his consort Isis gathered the pieces together and they were reunited by his son Anubis. One piece, however, was missing: Osiris's genitals had been thrown by Set into the Nile, where they were swallowed by a fish. Fish are ancient symbols both of the phallus and of the female genitals, which "swallow" those of the male. These multivalent associations of fish both with spirituality and regeneration, and with fertility and creativity, lead us to look at other examples of fish that appeared in Brown's art during the same year in which *The Bride* was painted.

In *The Mermaid* (cat. no. 45, p. 220), Brown depicts



CAT. NO. 116 (above).
*A New Age: The Bolti Fish
(Transformation)*, 1984.

FIG. 95 (right). *Jonah and
the Whale*, Iranian,
Early Timurid period,
ca. 1400. Illustration
from *Jami at-Tawarikh*
(Compendium of Histories),
by Rashid ad Din, Fadh Allah.





CAT. NO. 45. *The Mermaid*, 1970.

herself as a black mermaid with a sequined tail who stares calmly at us from on top of what appear to be white ice floes in a choppy red sea full of leaping fish. In *Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat* (cat. no. 49, p. 224), Brown stands in her paint clothes in a red room holding a paintbrush in her right hand and embracing a very large fish with her left arm, while a cat rubs against her ankle. The fish theme is also key to the odd pair of paintings from the fall of 1970: *Devil Standing on Fish* and *Eve with Fish & Snakes* (cat. nos. 46, 47). The *Devil* stands on a pink fish as he brandishes a large, harlequin-patterned snake over his head. His body is divided vertically: his right side, including his penis, is red; his left side is black. The color red, along with the color black, were ubiquitous in Brown's paintings from this period.⁶⁸ Red, the color of blood, is associated with life, with power, and with passion. Black, the color of darkness, is associated with death in the West, but more universally with mystery, earthiness, and the unconscious. The *Devil's* legs and feet are striped like the rat's tail in *The Bride*, which links him both with the rat and with the snake—his own harlequin-patterned snake and the garishly colored snakes in *Eve with Fish & Snakes*, one of which (the one that extends its forked tongue toward Eve) is also striped. In *Eve*, which is a self-portrait, a Gauguinesque⁶⁹ Brown clutches a similar pink fish to her body as she stands on what appears to be a black rock amid a sea of threatening but subdued snakes.

This puzzling pair of paintings would seem to express Joan Brown's interpretation of The Fall. In traditional representations of this event, Eve is usually depicted as the temptress who covets the opportunity to know what God knows, and leads Adam to join her in tasting the forbidden fruit. In Brown's psychologically complex version, Adam does not figure, and the fruit has been transformed into a fish. The model for this particular fish was a red snapper, which Brown photographed and used for both paintings (fig. 96). Its pink color emphasizes the femininity of this personal symbol of sexual knowledge and power. The *Devil*, who with his contrasting colors would seem to be the life force and death force incarnate, tramples the feminine fish as he holds up his masculine snake in a gesture of victory. For the gentle Eve, the fish serves as a talisman. Standing on a black pedestal, Eve is protected by her fish from the threatening snakes. It is her connection with both the unconscious, symbolized by the black pedestal, and with her own generative power, symbolized by the pink fish, that gives Eve/Brown her power.

The *Devil* and *Eve* were seemingly created as a pair. Their iconography is difficult to interpret, however, and it

is helpful also to compare the *Devil* with *The Mermaid*, and *Eve* with the *Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat*. Like *The Bride*, *The Mermaid* and the *Devil* share a lavish use of glitter, which recalls Brown's statement that she eventually began to exploit glitter's associations with "cheapness, vulgarity, things like that"—associations that seem particularly apt for the *Devil*. The *Devil's* relationship with the fish is clearly one of domination. As for the *Mermaid*—half human, half fish, she is a symbol of the union of our human and spiritual natures. This is an unusually earthy-looking mermaid—hers is not the stereotypical female body of *The Bride*, but a real woman's body, complete with slightly pendulous breasts of unequal sizes and a definite tummy. Her black skin links her with Mami Wata, the water spirit of the Ibibio, Igbo, and other African peoples, a deity capable of bestowing blessings or inflicting pain.⁷⁰ *The Mermaid's* black skin and her red ocean home are similar to the *Devil's* red and black body, but the overtones here are completely different. Cool, like the ice she sits on, this mermaid is a totally earthy as well as a totally spiritual being. Like *Eve*, she is a self-portrait of the artist, but her relation to the watery world of the unconscious and of creative force (note the leaping fish) seems much more self-assured than that of *Eve*, who clutches her fish defensively to her body within the masculine realm of the snakes.

Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat shows Brown working in a less assertively allegorical mode. *Self-Portrait with Fish* is a reprise and bringing together of the essential themes contained in *The Bride*, *The Mermaid*, and especially (as the similar titles indicate) *Eve with Fish & Snakes*. Unlike those intensely symbolic paintings, *Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat* is a straightforward self-portrait in which Brown confronts us in her paint clothes, her paintbrush in her hand. Like *Eve*, she holds a large fish—in this case a golden fish—against the left side of her body. A black cat rubs against her ankles. The scene takes place in a red room with a red tile floor onto which Brown and the cat cast black shadows that connect them with the edge of the picture and thus with the world. Like Brown in *Eve with Fish*, Brown in *Self-Portrait* holds the fish as a talisman, a symbol of her creativity. But it is a trophy fish too, a beautiful, big, lively fish, like those in *The Mermaid*, seemingly caught in the act of jumping. Brown's "alter ego," the cat, is black, a color that connects it, and by extension her, with the unconscious. Her paintbrush in her hand, she is ready to paint, to act, to create order out of chaos.

In *The Bride*, the multicolored fish float serenely behind the bride's cat head in an ethereal blue sky above a



CAT. NO. 46. *Devil Standing on Fish*, 1970.



CAT. NO. 47 (left). *Paradise Series #1: Eve with Fish & Snakes*, 1970.

FIG. 96 (below). *Red snapper*, 1970.





CAT. NO. 49. *Self-Portrait with Fish and Cat*, 1970.



FIG. 97. Henri Rousseau. *War* (*La Guerre* or *La chevauchée de la Discorde*), 1894.

black field from which grow orange California poppies, red wild poppies, and white and blue morning glories. More individualized than the generic salmon that frame the earlier *In Memory of My Father*, these fish, like the rat, seem held in thrall by the spell of the confident cat. Like the fish, the flowers no doubt had their genesis in Brown's own Eden: her new delta home in the spring. In the painting, these flowers grow out of scorched, black soil that resembles the blasted ground in the painting *War*, by Brown's stylistic model Henri Rousseau (fig. 97). Brown had been through her own wars—personal and psychological struggles symbolized by the rat—and had not only survived, but triumphed. Poppies are symbols of forgetfulness and happy dreams; morning glories of fresh beginnings. These flowers ground *The Bride*, literally and figuratively, in the wisdom of the unconscious, just as the fish envelop her in an aura of creativity and spirituality.⁷¹

Joan Brown painted an untitled work of eight symbolic trigrams (cat. no. 98, p. 226) in 1979, almost ten years after she painted *The Bride* and three years after she began the series of travels that helped to coalesce her philosophy of art as an expression of “the superconscious, which is a very spiritual way of being.”⁷² In this relatively small (three by two feet) painting on paper, the Chinese trigrams of the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, surround a quote from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The Chinese trigrams are reminiscent of the Chinese characters in the background of *Portrait of a Girl* (cat. no. 51, p. 196), Brown's other major symbolic self-portrait, along with *The Bride*, from her mid-career period in the 1970s. Brown explained the meaning of the trigram painting in a 1985 lecture: “This was [from] the final series [on China]. The quote here . . . says: “The

end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know this place for the first time.’ Coming back to the self.”⁷³ The trigram painting presents in a literal way what had been veiled in allegory in *Portrait of a Girl*: for Joan Brown, creating art was a process of “coming back to the self.” Few painters (among them Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch) have pursued this goal through their art with such openness and honesty. Over the course of Brown's life, the focus of her art shifted from a self-exploration whose symbolic terms were veiled, even, at times, to herself, to a more programmatic metaphorical expression of deeply held spiritual beliefs. In the end, perhaps all religion is personal. The richer, complex expression of Brown's earlier work has won higher praise from art historians and critics than her simpler, more direct work from the 1980s. But the truth of the matter is: Joan Brown didn't care. She had consciously shifted her focus by the end of her career from self-exploration to sharing the results of her research and her hard-won knowledge with as wide an audience as possible.

Despite her many teachers, Joan Brown was fundamentally a self-made person. Her work from the important period of 1970 and 1971 shows us this person, this artist, in many contradictory aspects—sad and triumphant, fearful and confident, loving and powerful. *The Bride* resists easy, even persistent, interpretation, yet it is one of the artist's most satisfying works. Of all the paintings Brown produced during this time, *The Bride* is perhaps the most complete expression of her analytical, intuitive, adventurous nature. It is not only a superb aesthetic and technical accomplishment; *The Bride* effectively and in a completely fresh way also presents us with an image of the soul—Joan Brown's soul, an entity capable of amazing toughness, sensitivity, and transformation.



CAT. NO. 98. Untitled
(Eight symbolic trigrams), 1979.

NOTES

1. Joan Brown, quoted in Nancy Azara, "Artists in Their Own Image," *Ms.* 1, no. 7 (January 1973): 58. *Woman Wearing Mask*, 1972 (cat. no. 55), is illustrated.

2. Joan Brown, quoted in Miriam Schapiro, ed., *Art: A Woman's Sensibility* (Valencia, Calif.: California Institute of the Arts, 1975), p. 12.

3. In a San Francisco Art Institute program, "On the Spiritual in Art," with Gordon Onslow-Ford, 31 January 1987, Brown talked about her interest in ancient cultures and metaphysics when she was in school at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Had she revealed these interests at the time, "people would have considered me invalid as an artist, a nut. . . it was a very existential kind of time, and if there was any philosophy that was accepted and pushed. . . it was existentialism"; from a tape in the SFAI library; my thanks to Jeff Gunderson.

4. Archives of American Art (AAA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., interview with Joan Brown by Paul Karlstrom, San Francisco, transcribed manuscript, 1 July 1975, p. 44.

5. AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 43.

6. From an interview with Karen Heilman, 4 April 1985. Karen Heilman, "On Joan Brown," a paper for Peter Selz's course in Contemporary Art History at the University of California, Berkeley, completed 9 May 1985 (estate of Joan Brown, collection of Michael Hebel and Noel Neri).

7. In the 1987 SFAI program, "On the Spiritual in Art" (cited in n. 3), Brown talked about meeting "an older lady" who was a Rosicrucianist while walking dogs in the park when she was about nine. She attributed the sparking of her interest in Egyptology, especially the religion of Akhenaton, to this childhood friendship.

8. Quoted in Schapiro, *Art: A Woman's Sensibility*, p. 12.

9. From an interview by Andrée Maréchal-Workman, "An Interview with Joan Brown," *Expo-see* (March–April 1985): n.p. There were limits to interpretation for her, however. Discussing in some depth the psychological meaning of checked patterns in her work with Paul Karlstrom, she concluded: "I don't want to analyze this; I hate doing this kind of thing. I don't like it when other people do, especially psychiatrists, psychologists, art historians"; AAA, 15 July 1975, p. 14.

10. In Brown's library are paperback editions of Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975), *The Turning Point* (1983), and *Uncommon Wisdom* (1989). Brown stated in her 31 January 1987 SFAI lecture (cited n. 3) that in her painting she attempted to render in visual form Capra's description of the interchangeability of matter and energy. See in particular the backgrounds of her paintings from the late 1970s, such as cat. no. 95, p. 154.

11. From a videotape of a Joan Brown lecture to a Sai Baba group in San Diego on 6 August 1985, at the time of the dedication of her obelisk there; tape in the collection of Noel Neri.

12. AAA, 1 July 1975, pp. 25–26.

13. AAA, 1 July 1975, pp. 15–16.

14. I base this dating on three facts. First, the painting is dated on the back "6/30/70." Second, in a 1975 lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute (18 April; tape in the SFAI library) Brown

stated that she worked on *The Bride* "for about three months." Third, in the same 1975 lecture Brown stated that *In Memory of My Father*, which was probably begun around the first anniversary of her father's death in January and is dated 3/23/70, was the first painting in which she used commercial oil enamels. *The Bride*, which is also painted with oil enamels, is the only other large painting from 1970 to be painted on canvas—all the other paintings from 1970 except the small *Self-Portrait* (cat. no. 43, p. 209, dated 5/21/70) are on masonite. I surmise, therefore, that she took up *The Bride* soon after she finished *In Memory of My Father*. (Brown seems to have liked the smooth surface of masonite, but not to have liked its weight; she switched back to canvas, densely primed with smooth rabbit-skin glue, in 1972.)

15. In Joan Brown's library is a battered, paint-covered copy of Jean Bouret's *Henri Rousseau* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1961) inscribed, "From Gordon in Fall 1967. / chewed up by Rufus & Allen Fall 1968!" The first major painting to show a strong Rousseauian influence is *Buffalo in Golden Gate Park*, 1968 (cat. no. 39, p. 87).

16. "I wanted a flatter kind of surface and a thinner surface but yet that had a lot of oil in it. . . The paint was crawling and doing all kinds of terrible things [for an example of these problems, see *A Mouse in Snug Harbor*, 1969, cat. no. 41, p. 206], and then one day when I was living in the country, accidentally I ran out of oil paint. . . It was an hour and a half from the nearest place. . . where I could get some oil paint. . . [S]o I went to the local hardware stores, and I brought home some red and some black and discovered it was exactly the same kind of surface I had been looking for for years. . . And it was quick because it dries fast"; transcript of videotape interview by Kate Horsfield, "On Art and Artists: Joan Brown," *Profile 2* (May 1982): 15–16.

17. Horsfield interview, p. 20.

18. Brown loved to paint large pictures; Horsfield interview, p. 19.

19. From the tape of the 18 April 1975 lecture at the SFAI (cited n. 14).

20. AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 9. "I would make paper dolls for other kids on the block, and then we would have a story—each kid would have a certain paper doll, and I would tell them what character they would assume. . . oh, and a dollhouse. . . So I'd spend ages hovering over the dollhouse and dolls"; *ibid.*, p. 10.

21. AAA, 1 July 1975, pp. 6–8. Brown's mother and father actually bought and moved into two separate houses when Joan was very young, only to move back into their original apartment both times. Joan's mother hung herself in that apartment, in which Joan claimed she had "never spent one moment alone. . . It was black, dark, scary, like a Dracula house to me, and I would never be alone in it"; *ibid.*, p. 16.

22. There were no bedrooms; only a kitchen, bathroom, and dining room, where Joan and her grandmother slept, and a living room, where her parents slept.

23. AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 12.

24. Sai Baba—the name of Brown's spiritual guide from 1980 until her death—translates as "divine mother/father." See previous essay, n. 233.

25. AAA, 1 July 1975, pp. 27–28.
26. Brown's statement that she "learned a great deal about gentleness" from her father is something of an anomaly. One component of her famously feisty temperament was surely not only anger with her mother but also repressed rage at her father for his passivity and drunkenness.
27. *The Horizon Book of the Arts of China* and *The Horizon History of China* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1969). Both images were taken from vol. 2, pp. 37–38 (characters) and 73 (dragon).
28. AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 20.
29. Quoted in Butterfield interview, "Joan Brown in Conversation with Jan Butterfield," *Visual Dialog* 1, no. 2 (December 1975–February 1976): 17.
30. Rosebuds also appear in the pattern of the wallpaper in the background of *Girl with Gorilla & Wolf*, 1971 (fig. 61, p. 105), painted the previous winter.
31. The girl's pose is very close to that of the girl in Gustav Klimt's *Portrait of Mäda Primavesi* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. (Thanks to Stephen Walrod for this observation.)
32. From an interview by Gerrie Kretzmer, 6 May 1982 (from a student paper, a copy of which is in the collection of Michael Hebel and Noel Neri), p. 4.
33. AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 24.
34. AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 10.
35. AAA, 15 July 1975, p. 15.
36. Caroline A. Jones, *Bay Area Figurative Art: 1950–1965*, exh. cat. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press and San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 148.
37. Brown told Karlstrom her father had lied about his age to serve in the war: "he was only about fifteen"; AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 2. In fact, he would have been seventeen in February 1914. In the Karlstrom interview, she describes herself as lying about her own age to get jobs: "from fourteen on I worked summers . . . lied, said I was eighteen, and graduated from high school"; *ibid.*, p. 19.
38. From tape of the 18 April 1975 SFAI lecture (cited n. 14).
39. Brown's father was Irish, and one of his favorite bars was the Little Shamrock.
40. AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 2.
41. AAA, 9 September 1975, p. 22.
42. Brown's feelings about her mother were quite overt: "I hated my mother," she told Karlstrom; AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 13.
43. Although Brown stressed to Karlstrom that she didn't mind her childhood isolation, that she liked being alone, she nevertheless described the "real sense of isolation" as the most frightening aspect of her traumatic 1975 Alcatraz swim; AAA, 9 September 1975, p. 7.
44. Brown was able to recount the history of her family in unusual depth and detail during her 1975 interviews with Paul Karlstrom.
45. Santa Claus appears in Brown's painting *Questions & Answers* #1 of 1983 (cat. no. 110, p. 164), where he is accompanied by a painted inscription: "I have always thought of Christmas," wrote Charles Dickens, 'as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely.'"
46. From the Horsfield interview, p. 21.
47. Brown attended Catholic schools throughout her youth; Catholic emblem books and images of saints may have influenced her deployment of symbols.
48. On Brunton, see previous essay, pp. 146, 148. Brown liked what she perceived as Egyptian humor. She revealed her own attitude toward humor in her work when she told an interviewer: "The Egyptians were very, very witty. . . . And I like the wit. Not a sarcastic kind of humor. Just wit about people, about being able to laugh at yourself, about everyday occurrences"; AAA, 15 July 1975, p. 11.
49. Joan Brown said in 1975, "As a kid you resent your parents being weak, but as you grow older you find out, hell, you are too"; AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 14.
50. AAA, 1 July 1975, pp. 25–26.
51. In response to a question about the animals in *In Memory of My Father* during her 1975 SFAI lecture, Brown responded, "he liked animals a great deal, and the dog and the cat were our animals." Although Brown walked dogs as a child, the Beattys did not own pets; there was no room for them. And, as discussed above, the dog in this painting was Brown's own dog around the time of her father's death. Brown was either dissimulating (which is quite possible), or she was indicating that she identified the dog and the cat with her father and herself. For an interesting discussion by Brown about her association of dogs with her father, see AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 30.
52. From the video of the 6 August 1985 San Diego lecture (cited n. 11).
53. *Ibid.*
54. Gerrie Kretzmer, "Epilogue," student notes from a 1982 Joan Brown slide lecture (copy in collection of Michael Hebel and Noel Neri), p. 2.
55. There are, in fact, more precise Egyptian prototypes for the bride's cat-headed female form than the sphinx: the goddess Bast, guardian of marriage, who is represented as a cat or a cat-headed woman; and the related goddess Sekhmet, who is depicted as a lioness or a woman with a lion's head. Both forms of the cat-headed goddess were associated with Ptah, god of fertility, creator, and patron of the arts. During the Empire period of Egyptian history the love goddess Astarte joined the Egyptian pantheon of feline deities. The Norse goddess of love, Freyja, was also a cat goddess.
56. The inscription on the painting reads: "THE DUAL TIGER SPHINX ARE COMPOSED OF SOLID ROCK. THEY STAND 189 FT. LONG AND 66 FT. HIGH. THE RECLINING TIGER SPHINX HAS THE BODY AND PAWS OF A TIGER BUT IT'S [sic] HEAD IS THAT OF A SENSITIVE MAN. THE STANDING TIGER SPHINX HAS THE HEAD OF A FORMIDABLE TIGER AND THE BODY OF A MAN DRESSED IN CONTEMPORARY GARB."
57. From the tape of the 31 January 1987 SFAI lecture (cited n. 3).
58. See n. 2 above.
59. Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, first published by The Theosophical Publishing House in Adyar, Madras, India, in 1925 and reissued in numerous subsequent editions. There are two copies of this book in Brown's library. It is interesting to compare the colors Brown associates with the various animals in her wheel of Chinese astrological symbols with the meanings assigned to these colors in the frontispiece to the

book. This "key to the meanings of colors" corresponds with all but one of the colors in Brown's astrological wheel. (The white background of the rabbit does not appear on Leadbeater's chart.) Brown's rat is given a background of dirty green, which represents "selfishness"; the dog's background is a brighter green, meaning "sympathy"; the background of the snake is black, meaning "hatred and malice"; and that of the dragon is gray, which represents "fear." Brown's own tiger has a rose-colored background, the same color as the shirt she is wearing. According to Besant and Leadbeater, rose stands for "that absolutely unselfish love which is possible only to high natures"; Besant and Leadbeater, p. 23.

60. Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, p. 42.

61. From the video of the 6 August 1985 San Diego lecture (cited n. 11).

62. From the tape of the 18 April 1975 SFAI lecture (cited n. 14).

63. AAA, 1 July 1975, p. 10.

64. Both also dominate the view from Brown's first permanent refuge from her home life: the San Francisco Art Institute. The viewpoint of *Seascape in the Garden of Eden*, with its fish-devouring birds (fig. 83), is from under the Golden Gate Bridge, with the Marin Headlands on the right and the shoreline of Lincoln Park on the left. (Thanks to Joe Vernaci for this observation.)

65. For more information on Sava's influence on Brown, see the previous essay, pp. 115–17.

66. "For several years now I've performed the daily ritual of swimming in San Francisco Bay. . . . I depend on this swim. . . . It is actually a form of meditation"; Joan Brown, quoted in Henry Hopkins, *50 West Coast Artists* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1981), p. 34.

67. From the video of the 6 August 1985 San Diego lecture (cited n. 11).

68. As her story of running out of these two colors while painting *In Memory of My Father* attests (see n. 16).

69. Among other things, these paintings reveal an increasing stylistic and thematic influence of the nineteenth-century symbolist artist Paul Gauguin, who by and large replaced Rousseau as Brown's artistic model in the summer of 1970, and to whom she produced a painted homage, *Woman with Gauguin Painting*, in 1972 (cat. no. 59, p. 106). In 1889 Gauguin created a series of paintings on the theme of the Garden of Eden in the dining room of the inn at which he was living in Le Pouldu. A reproduction of his *Self-Portrait with Halo and Snake* from that series was one of the reproductions pinned up in Brown's studio at the time of her death. Elements in Brown's *Eve* and *Devil* have as their sources specific works by Gauguin. The yellow hill and aqua-colored sky in the background of the *Eve*, for example, appear to be based on Gauguin's 1892 painting *Sacred Mountain*. The odd physiognomy of Brown's *Devil* may have been inspired by Gauguin's sculpture *Father Lechery*.

70. As a water spirit, Mami Wata's attribute is, interestingly enough, the snake; she is often depicted wreathed in snakes.

71. Close inspection reveals that the black paint of the ground overlaps the colored paint of the flowers, and thus was added after the flowers were painted. (Thanks to Richard Lorenz for pointing this out to me.)

72. From the video of the 6 August 1985 San Diego lecture (cited n. 11). By the "superconscious" Brown probably meant something very similar to Paul Brunton's "overself." See Paul Brunton, *The Quest of the Overself*, 2d rev. ed. (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1984). Brown owned the 1975 paperback edition. Brown frequently cited Brunton as an influence, and he is one of four figures to whom she painted "homages" in 1983. (The other three were Akhenaton, Quetzalcoatl, and Charlie Sava.)

73. From the video of the 6 August 1985 San Diego lecture (cited n. 11). The actual text on the painting reads: "The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time. T. S. Eliot."