Welcome to Episode 96: Sally Brown: Body Prints

The contemporary artist, curator, writer, designer Sally Brown finds freedom in drawing. Her joy is "lines on paper and canvas whether pencil, ink, watercolor or body print lines." Each line is a moment. From this most basic building block of art, the line, women's voices in relation to the body, specifically Brown's body through a multitude of perspectives are amplified. In this, deep universal exploration of the body, Brown finds her way as a "woman, mother, sensual being at one with my body and self"

Brown's interest in self portraiture stems from taking self portraits with her camera from the age of six, into adulthood as an undergrad art major. She says "I have always been interested in the relationship of the outside of my body to the inside." Her artistic practice encompasses literal self-portraiture and journal writing.

In her series "Voice Body Prints" (2012-13) Brown is inspired in part by "women expressing themselves with their bodies so courageously and blatantly" in their creative processes. In her series, she uses her body as the printing plate for her body prints. This idea or strategy of using the body as a sculptural medium came out the rejection of creating objects through traditional methods in the 1960s. Earth artists, for example, changed the literal landscape instead of just painting it on the canvas. and feminists artists challenged and questioned issues of gender using their bodies as a medium; we experience this in body prints but also in performance art. One example Yoko Ono's "Cut Piece" from 1964-- As you listen to the description from the Museum of Modern Art, think about how she employs her body as a sculptural medium. "Sitting alone on a stage, dressed in her best suit with a pair of scissors in front of her, she instructs the audience that they could take turns approaching her and use the scissors to cut off a small piece of clothing which was theirs to keep. As members of the audience approached her, sometimes hesitantly, sometimes boldly snipping away, Yoko Ono remained motionless and expressionless until at her discretion the performance ended. In reflecting upon her experience, Ono said, "When I get in the Cut piece, I get into a trance and so I don't feel too frightened...We usually give something with a purpose..but I wanted to see what they would take.

In her visual expression, Brown explores her own female body focusing on the vulva. She uses kid's tempera paint as a medium, the vulva, is the printing plate. Resulting works include "Androgyny," "Double Edged Sword," "Offer," all are represented through the vaginal form, this is an image she repeats over and over creating individual body prints with varying color palette combinations; representation of sexuality, that universal feminine sensibility. Brown describes the process as "meditating as I use various colors intuitively and physically stamp myself onto paper or canvas. The brushstrokes reflect expressively."

We experience in these her feminist intent, a gendered discourse representing women's difference from men, but also differences among women because Brown's personal experiences are embedded and blossom for us in through bold colors and "various drips and lines". This series is as Brown shares "another form of self-portraiture, closer to the center, to the raw form that is the human form, and very personable, as I am doing my own body-print over and over." They "echo the beautiful in-determination that is visual art and life."

Let's look at two of the prints more closely. Side note: When I am in the process of research and writing content for the podcast, I always choose one work to display on my desktop background. It is a way for me to live with the work, albeit digital, and allow its elements to saturate my senses. I want to credit the Lonely Palette podcast series for this idea. It is a good one!

In my looking experience at the work "Objectivity," I see the vulva form, red and yellow are the dominant colors with green tones seeping into the yellow with feathery brushstrokes. the

in the work "Offer," Brown adds text, transcribing a quote from an interview with a woman for her blog "Les Femmes Folles" evoking the voice of another woman. In the work "Offer" Stefanie Drootin, a musician, is quoted in small lettered text above a black, more abstracted view of the vulva, "there is still room for more female voices, and some people still need their eyes opened a little wider to see how much women have to offer."

There is a fascinating history of vaginal iconography and what feminist artist Judy Chicago asserts is "stamp of femaleness, her hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity." The female anatomy plays a crucial role in feminist art discourse. To better understand the context of feminist imagery is to see it and explore it through a work of art like The Dinner Party (1974-1979) by Judy Chicago, It is a large complex, mixed-media installation dedicated to hundreds of women and women artists "rescued from anonymity" It is comprised of "a massive ceremonial banquet, arranged on a triangular table with a total of thirty-nine place settings, each commemorating an important woman from history. The settings consist of embroidered runners, gold chalices and utensils and china-painted porcelain plates with raised central motifs that are based on vulvar and butterfly forms and rendered in styles appropriate to the individual women being honored. The purpose was "to end the ongoing cycle of omission in which women were written out of history."

The vulva form, specifically chosen by Chicago, expresses what she calls "the central core, my vagina that which made me a woman," is the primary imagery for each of the plates in her iconic installation--this choice demonstrates and illustrates that the one thing that united these forgotten historical subjects at the table was that they all had the same genitalia." She reclaims and celebrates the mark of women's "otherness." through a "new visual language" in which to express women's experience.

I have experienced this installation a few times in my visits to the Brooklyn Museum where it is permanently housed. What is striking is the multi-sensory elements that make up the place settings--"gleaming white linen, colorful place settings, lustrous white porcelain tiles with gold names written in script on the floor of 999 relevant women, the colorful needlework runners, golden goblets--the writer Susan Havens Caldwell described it as luminous, the overall beauty in the work "evokes strong conviction and conception." It appeals to both the intellect and the senses through the meticulous craft."

At the center are the dinner plates--each carefully rendered to express a woman in this tour of figures of Western Civilization; representation of feminine history. Instead of a portrait of the woman, she is depicted abstractly in the round plates with vaginal references. The plates confront the viewer with its female form imagery or language. Using the vagina image both "celebrates women and protests their circumstances--it is a reminder that in patriarchal cultures woman has been reduced to her sexual organs; Chicago's images on the plates restore to them their full power as emblems of creativity and metamorphosis. When I reflect on my experiences walking along the lengths of the three connected tables, taking in each stylized plate setting, connecting my knowledge of the name of the woman scripted in needlework on the runner and the bursting plate setting, what I see is not her accomplishments but her "core" and the connection between myself and what I have universally common with her, "positive, powerful, thrusting, aggressive, assertive female form.

Brown in a very intimate, personal way, explores through her "core," her universal female form, through the repetition of the vaginal image in her body prints a prism of personal experiences and identities or perhaps role is a better description of what I shared at the top of the episode, "woman, mother, sensual being." Vaginal imagery in both Brown's prints and in Chicago's monumental work is not an erotic one, but, for certain for Chicago, it is a political gesture---I think in the context of Brown's works, the agenda is not overtly politicized. She asserts as she says "universal truth." The folds and curves, the hollow of the vagina expels her woman's roar through its central shape, petal like forms, her "unchanging female essence. It expresses and again to quote Chicago, "What does it feel like to be a woman? To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from life emerges?" This central core imagery celebrates sexual differences and expresses pride in female body, her spirit. It is an aspect of our desire and is subjective to "female knowledge and experience."

In the context of Brown's series One Voice the female form is front and center within the landscape of the composition and though it is positioned on a two dimensional space and not anchored in a three dimensional object like a dinner plate framed by napkin, goblet, and table runner, the flow of paint, elongated curved brushstrokes exposes a part of her narrative. And I love this and relate to this because her work, her process aligns with her personal experiences. Brown's series draws us into her personal narrative, in her sphere, she draws from her daily life, documenting that life and I the viewer can enter in it too. Brown, herself, noted in her article centered on Chicago and the Dinner Party for Women's Art Journal, and yes she is also a scholarly writer, "at the time artist were using imagery like the vulva to critique society's reduction of women to their biology--for second wave feminists like Chicago, the use of feminine iconography, celebrated and broadened the discussion of women."

Brown continues that discussion in her ongoing series (since 2018) Feminist Tribute Drawings and Prints. She describes this series as "works that continue my explorations with motherhood, the body and nature with a sense of humor in a cyclical act of tribute to various women and feminist artists" The series is a reflection "on how so many women have been lost to history and my attempt to recall and remember some of them I have learned about" Through the creative act and again employing her body through body prints she honors these women artists. Let's take a close look at one of the works in the series "Mother Art (Tribute to Louise Bourgeois") is an acrylic and pencil on paper. Who is Louise Bourgeois? A prolific artist and sculptor, she worked across a wide variety of mediums including painting and drawing. Her work dealt largely in "dissecting, exploring and reacting to traumatic events from her own childhood which included her father's infidelity. Her works are very autobiographical, they are represented from the female viewpoint, especially in regards to suppression and she uses visual language to transform her experiences and the universal emotions behind them; like sexual desire, jealousy, fear, anxiety, loneliness. I produced an episode on Louise Bourgeois, number 41---I will add it to the podcast notes if you are interested in learning more-- it is a dive into her sculpture Femme Couteau, an interplay between the feminine erotic and the violent.

In the tribute to Louise Bourgeois work, we see pure expression through color and abstract form anchored against a pink background. Like the female imagery in the Voices series, it is a body print of Brown, but as she notes, "more of the side of my body." Scripted is a quote by Bourgeois. "The feminists took me as a role model, as a mother. It bothers me. I am not interested in being a mother. I am still a girl trying to understand myself." Brown shared with me she loves Louise's complexity. In an email she wrote-- "Bourgeois had a hard time as a mother and I think it really shows through her drawings. I saw an exhibition of her drawings and just fell in love with the authentic, raw, intimate quality. Of course her monumental sculptures representing her mother are fabulous too--her anxiety over this role of motherhood is just so relatable, but not much discussed."

And yet, Brown charges forth in this smaller work to explore motherhood through Bourgeois words and her body. As the viewer, my looking experience is so intimate, the multitude of colors, blues and blacks, reds and pinks seep into one another in a fluid figural form. Beyond the paint of the work are the words by Bourgeois and the associations we make between the text and Bourgeois vulnerability, her conflicted feelings over being a mother--her view of herself as a "girl trying to understand myself."

Part of Brown's intentions in creating this series of works is to "leave them raw and unfinished to bring a grounded result, challenging the traditional high-art pristine, golden-framed works that, to me, produce a distance between viewer and artwork." let's sit with that intention for a moment. In essence Brown obliterates the hierarchy of fine art, the artistic traditions within the patriarchal canon of Western art into approachable works--a sanctuary space of sorts that you and I can step into, every time I contemplate her works. It is a beautiful, serene, yet it challenges us to think about our own narratives and the roles we embrace as woman, mother and sensual being.

Now my conversation with Sally Brown.

Questions: Sally Brown

1. You describe yourself in your story on your website that you have "feminist intent." Can you share what "feminist intent" it for you and the role it plays in your artistic practice?

2. You have so much courage to explore your physical body and its relations to women's experiences and voices--I discussed some of those works in the episode. Can you share more about the process and some of the decisions you make in creating your "body prints"? Please take us into the act of creating using your body versus traditional media.

3. You dive into so many aspects of the visual arts and art history--including design work, photo modeling, live art making--to be honest I was pleasantly overwhelmed and in awe of your ability to be both creator and spectator. Can you share current project you are working on? What aspect of your inner self is being exposed?

Thank you Sally and thank you for listening. Resources for this episode include Sally Brown website, Brooklyn Museum, Museum of Modern Art, Judy Chicago Foundation, the writings of Linda Nochlin, Whitney Chadwick, all listed in the podcast notes. Works discussed can be viewed on my website at beyondthepaint.net, on Instagram @beyondthepaintpodcast. Please experience more of Sally Brown's art and follow her at @sallery\_art on Instagram. As I close this episode, I encourage you to think about the ways artists use their bodies as a sculptural medium. What is visualized that traditional brush and paint does not capture? Email me at bernadine@beyondthepaint.net. I may share them in future podcast episode. Thank you