

SFMOMA ANNOUNCES FIRST RETROSPECTIVE OF BAY AREA ARTIST JOAN BROWN IN MORE THAN 20 YEARS

**Lively Retrospective Spans the Highly Original
Artistic Career of San Francisco–Born Painter**



JOAN BROWN

November 19, 2022–March 12, 2023

Press Preview: Wednesday, November 16, 9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (August 11, 2022; updated November 14, 2022)—Born in San Francisco in 1938, artist Joan Brown created colorful, expansive paintings and inventive sculptures inspired by her experiences in the city—where she lived and worked for much of her life—as well as her influential international travels. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) today announces **Joan Brown**, the most in-depth examination of the artist’s work in over two decades.

“We are thrilled to present *Joan Brown*, a reassessment of the unabashedly personal, defiantly independent and enduringly relevant career of one of San Francisco’s most important local heroes,” said Janet Bishop, Thomas Weisel Family Chief Curator and Curator of Painting and Sculpture at SFMOMA.

On view at SFMOMA from November 19, 2022 through March 12, 2023 and bringing together approximately 80 works in a variety of media, *Joan Brown* charts the breadth and depth of the artist’s career, once dismissed by critics as unserious but rooted in impassioned curiosity and research. Deeply embedded in the Bay Area art scene, Brown drew inspiration from many sources to create a charmingly offbeat body of work that embraces autobiography, fantasy and whimsy as well as weightier metaphysical themes.

Brown earned a BFA and MFA from the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA)—later the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI)—where she met a key mentor, artist Elmer Bischoff, and began gaining recognition for her paintings. By age 22, Brown had achieved remarkable critical and commercial success. She was included in SFMOMA's annuals in both 1957 and 1958 and was the youngest artist exhibited as part of *Young America 1960 (Thirty American Painters Under Thirty-Six)* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. By 1964, her works had been featured on the cover of *Artforum* and were in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, among others. Brown was the first in her cohort to achieve prominence outside San Francisco, but her fiery disinclination for the commercial side of the art world soon emerged, and it cemented into a lifelong antipathy that would prove decisive at key moments in her career.



EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

Spanning her days as a student at CSFA in the 1950s to her untimely death in 1990, *Joan Brown* showcases the artist's creative evolution. She began her 35-year career with luscious, abstract expressionist canvases and by the mid-1960s moved into graphic representational paintings portraying dogs, cats, swims, cityscapes and her son Noel; self-portraits; and works inspired by her spiritual explorations in the 1980s. Her references ranged from Rembrandt, Velázquez, Goya and Matisse to Egyptian art, Chinese art, Mesoamerican visual culture, Hinduism, her swimming coach and Theosophy. Brown pursued each of these myriad interests with single-minded dedication, typically researching them for years, with a curiosity that intensified over time, as her practice became suffused with spiritual purpose. Commonly characterized as the only female in the second generation of the Bay Area Figurative Movement, Brown was in reality an artist and person who defied easy classification. As she said herself, "I'm not any one thing: I'm not just a teacher, I'm not just a mother, I'm not just a painter, I'm all of these things, plus."

As Brown shifted across many roles and traveled around the globe, her commitment to the Bay remained constant. Works including *The Dancers in a City #2* and *Gordon, Joan and Rufus in Front of S.F. Opera House* make San Francisco's influence on Brown's artistic practice clear. She developed a longstanding relationship with SFMOMA, which hosted her first major solo exhibition in 1971 and went on to acquire 25 of her works. Brown's 1980 marriage to Michael S. Hebel was held at SFMOMA in a Hindu ceremony under Alexander Calder mobiles.

A long-time swimming enthusiast, Brown trained with International Hall of Fame swimming coach Charlie Sava—who appears in several of her portrait paintings—and she enjoyed frequent open-water swims in the Bay. Along with five other women, she successfully sued the Dolphin Club, the Ariel Club and the South End Rowing Club (SERC) to admit women, after which she became an active member of SERC. In 1975, Brown nearly drowned during a women’s Alcatraz swim in the San Francisco Bay, which became the subject of a series of introspective self-portraits. In works such as *After the Alcatraz Swim #3*, the freighter ship that contributed to her near-death experience can be seen in the pattern of her dress.

The inspiration gleaned from Brown’s travels is evident in works such as *The Golden Age: The Jaguar and The Tapir* and *Cat and Rat Obelisk* among others, while *The Long Journey, A New Age: The Bolti Fish* and *Summer Solstice* reveal Brown’s interest in spirituality and self-understanding.

Brown’s subjects feel at once familiar—animals, objects, swims in the Bay—and novel, incorporating an ever-expanding symbology that reached its zenith in the 1980s as she pursued a more spiritual, philosophical path. By the time she died in South India in 1990, she had produced more than 400 paintings and 50 sculptures. *Joan Brown* celebrates this full scope of the artist’s vibrant and wide-ranging career and illuminates how uniquely compelling Brown’s artistic practice is—now more than ever.

ORGANIZATION

Joan Brown is curated by Janet Bishop, SFMOMA’s Thomas Weisel Family Chief Curator and Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and Nancy Lim, SFMOMA’s associate curator of painting and sculpture.

CATALOGUE

Joan Brown is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated book featuring texts by curators Janet Bishop and Nancy Lim as well as essays by Solomon Adler, Marci Kwon and Helen Molesworth. Exploring Brown’s relationship to the self and family, to art history and to her wider artistic community, the catalogue examines the unique materiality of her paintings and explores her singular vision. In addition, select Brown works are paired with commentaries by a range of contemporary artists, friends and peers including Enrique Chagoya, Jean Conner, Sahar Khoury, Francis Mill, Dianna Molzan, Rebecca Morris, Ron Nagle, Noel Neri, Woody De Othello and Muzae Sesay. The publication concludes with an extensive illustrated chronology. The catalogue is published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with University of California Press.

BAY AREA STORIES: JOAN BROWN + FRIENDS

Organized to coincide with SFMOMA’s major Joan Brown retrospective, *Bay Area Stories: Joan Brown + Friends* is a collection-based installation that focuses on an interconnected network of artists working in the Bay Area from around the 1950s to the 1980s and beyond. Using Joan Brown as a locus and linked by their shared teachers, studios, homes and arts institutions, the artists whose works are included reflect many of the currents and conversations driving the idiosyncratic practices of Bay Area artists during this period. *Bay Area Stories: Joan Brown + Friends* opened on November 4, 2022 and is located on SFMOMA’s Floor 2.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS & EVENTS

SFMOMA celebrates Joan Brown’s contributions to San Francisco with programs that invite city explorations, swimming adventures, remembrances and animal appreciations.

On December 1, 2022 the museum will launch ***Joan Brown's Map of San Francisco***, a new commission by Squeak Carnwath, as part of the museum's Small Press Book Bazaar—a special pop-up sale with local vendors selling artists' books, zines, posters, T-shirts and more.

The **Free Family Day** on Sunday, January 8, 2022 will be inspired by Joan Brown's colorful life, her artwork and her hometown, San Francisco. Families can enjoy artmaking, storytelling, a scavenger hunt and a very special appearance by the Bay Area chapter of Drag Queen Story Hour.

The ***Joan Brown Jump and Swim*** on the morning of January 21, 2023 honors the artist's love of swimming and her successful class action sexual discrimination lawsuit she led in the mid-1970s against the all-male swim clubs to admit women. SFMOMA is partnering with the South End Rowing Club and Dolphin Club on a swim from Fort Mason to Aquatic Park. Swimming fans who are not club members are welcome to walk the route and cheer on the swimmers.

For ***Joan Brown and Friends*** on February 2, 2023 at 6 p.m., friends, family and fans will share reflections, stories and memories of the artist.

Pet Portraits on February 4, 2023, presented in partnership with the San Francisco SPCA, salutes Joan Brown's love of animals with commissioned portraits of favorite furry friends.

SUPPORT

Presenting support for *Joan Brown* is provided by Janet and Clint Reilly and anonymous donors. Major support is provided by Joachim and Nancy Hellman Bechtle, Lorna Meyer Calas and Dennis Calas, the Agnes Cowles Bourne Bay Area Contemporary Arts Exhibition Fund, the Mary Jane Elmore West Coast Exhibition Fund, The Elaine McKeon Endowed Exhibition Fund, the Stuart G. Moldaw Public Program and Exhibition Fund, Deborah and Kenneth Novack, Susan and Bill Oberndorf, the Bernard and Barbro Osher Exhibition Fund, Rummi and Arun Sarin Painting and Sculpture Fund, the Thomas Weisel Family, and Pat Wilson. Generous support is provided by Joan Roebuck and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art.

VENUES + DATES

SFMOMA: November 19, 2022–March 12, 2023

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA: May 27–September 24, 2023

Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa, CA: February 7–May 1, 2024

ADMISSION + HOURS

Annual membership begins at \$120, and members enjoy free admission and priority ticketing for special exhibitions with advanced reservations, as well as complimentary guest passes (varies by membership level). Adult general admission to SFMOMA is \$25; admission for seniors 65 years and older is \$22; and admission for visitors ages 19 through 24 is \$19. General admission and special exhibitions for all visitors 18 years and younger is free.

For local Bay Area residents, SFMOMA's First Thursdays offer free admission from 1–8 p.m. On Free Family Days, general admission to the museum is free for up to four adults accompanying one child or teen (18 and younger). For information about other free and discounted admission programs, please visit sfmoma.org/deals-discounts.

Museum hours are 10 a.m.–5 p.m. on Fridays through Tuesdays and 1–8 p.m. on Thursdays (closed Wednesdays). Current visitor information can be found at sfmoma.org/visit.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

151 Third Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is one of the largest museums of modern and contemporary art in the United States and a thriving cultural center for the Bay Area. Our remarkable collection of painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, design and media arts is housed in a LEED Gold-certified building designed by the global architects Snøhetta and Mario Botta. In addition to our seven gallery floors, SFMOMA offers 45,000 square feet of free, art-filled public space open to all.

Visit sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

** Follow us on Twitter for updates and announcements: [@SFMOMA_Press](https://twitter.com/SFMOMA_Press)

Media Contacts

Clara Hatcher Baruth, chatcher@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4177

Rebecca Herman, rherman@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4174

Image credits:

Joan Brown, *The Night Before the Alcatraz Swim*, 1975; G.U.C. Collection; © Estate of Joan Brown; photo: Michael Tropea
Joan Brown, *Gordon, Joan + Rufus in Front of S.F. Opera House*, 1969; Collection of Adam Lindemann; © Estate of Joan Brown