

Art in America

By **Eric Sutphin**

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Beside the entrance to this exhibition of collages, oil paintings and watercolors by artist and writer Joe Brainard hung two of his small floral paintings: *Untitled #247 (Pansies)*, 1979, and *Still Life* (1970). Flowers, pansies in particular, are a recurring motif in his work. His floral images served as a fitting introduction to the show, as they embody themes Brainard explored throughout his practice, such as intimacy (in terms of scale and emotion) and the value of the everyday.



Untitled (Heinz), 1977, mixed-medium collage, 7 by 5 inches

Raised in Tulsa, Okla., Brainard moved to New York in the early 1960s and became a member of the second generation of New York School poets and artists. His peers in this group included, among others, Ron Padgett (his childhood friend), Ted Berrigan, Anne Waldman and Jane Freilicher. (A concurrent presentation of Freilicher's large, sunny still lifes and landscapes was installed in a room next to the Brainard exhibition.) By the mid-1980s, Brainard demonstrated his "taste for absorption," as one writer put it in 2012, by swapping art-making and exhibiting for "chain smoking and reading Victorian novels." He died in 1994 of AIDS-related pneumonia.

Brainard is well known for his miniature collages, 40 of which were on view here, in three shelflike wall-mounted vitrines. Begun in the mid-'70s, these pieces are like tiny preserved moments, capturing subjects like food and ashtrays and fishbowls. By nature of their diminutive size (roughly 2 inches square), one is forced to get very close to observe their details. Collectively, the miniatures offer up something like a biography comprised of concise glimpses and memories, much like Brainard's book-length poem *I Remember* (1975).

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

A selection of Brainard's mixed-medium collages from the '60s and '70s hung on the walls, their sizes ranging from just larger than the miniatures to 20½ by 15 inches. Three works from 1975 titled "Bathroom Nudes" each show a young man in the shower, with the curtain drawn back. The images recall the sedate interior scenes painted by Fairfield Porter, while their bathroom settings have a graphic look that attests to Brainard's interest in comic strips (he created over 100 pieces based on the "Nancy" series, for instance) as well as in comic-inspired Pop art, evoking, in particular, Lichtenstein's work. (Another reference to Lichtenstein in the show came by way of the small collage *Untitled [Pop Art]*, ca. 1975, which depicts a cartoonlike exploding stick of dynamite.) Other pieces were both erotic and humorous. *Untitled (Heinz)*, 1977, for instance, consists of a close-up black-and-white image of an erect penis (presumably an image Xeroxed from a porn magazine) with cutout images of a pickle and a pear in place of the genitals.

In the 1966 collage *Madonna with Flowers IV* (the largest work on view), an image of the Virgin Mary with child is decorated with a white bow and surrounded by flowers of various colors and types and by areas of hand-drawn filigree. Made just three years after Brainard settled on the Lower East Side, this work is lush and optimistic, perhaps the expression of a young gay man coming into his own and celebrating his growing artistic voice. In a collage from 1978, *Untitled (Male Torso in Glass Cloche)*, Brainard shows a loincloth-clad male figure enclosed under a glass dome, placing his idealized subject on view while also keeping it protected. Indeed, by then he had become a master steward of beautiful things.