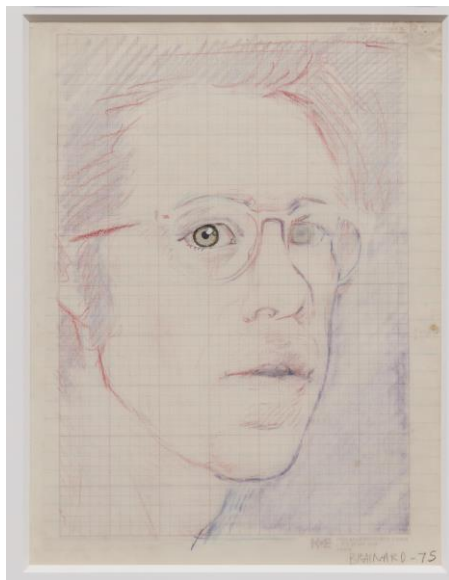


HYPERALLERGIC

Minor Master or Master of the Minor?

One reason Joe Brainard made so many small works was to convey that modesty and ambition were not mutually exclusive.

By John Yau – May 6, 2019



Joe Brainard, "Self Portrait" (1975), colored pencil, graphite and gouache on paper, 10.75 x 8.25 inches

Joe Brainard's last New York show in his lifetime was legendary because of the sheer number of works it included. It was in 1975 at the Fishbach Gallery and Brainard was in his early 30s. Rather than making large works, as did many of his contemporaries, he cheerfully did the opposite: within a period of a few years, Brainard made more than 3,000 tiny collages. The gallery managed to exhibit 1,500 of them, which was quite a logistical feat.

Brainard's reason for making small, affordable works is revealing. Talking to Lee Wohlfer about his students at the School of Visual Arts and about his motivations for working small, Brainard stated:

Most of the students agree that the art scene has gotten too big, too serious, too sacred, too self-important and too expensive.

Already a bad situation in Brainard's lifetime, the art world's self-importance has become appalling since his death in 1994. The triumph of obscene wealth, bulbous frivolity, and swell-headed immodesty is not something the art world should be proud of, yet it is. (Maybe it is time that critics start calling out curators who seem to chase and champion only financially successful artists who make large works.)

Beyond the fact that Brainard reveled in making art, I think one reason he made so many small works was to convey that modesty and ambition were not mutually exclusive. To this combination he added a large dose of relentlessness, heightened by his inclination to be thorough. He once wrote me that he was going to read all of Charles Dickens's novels again.

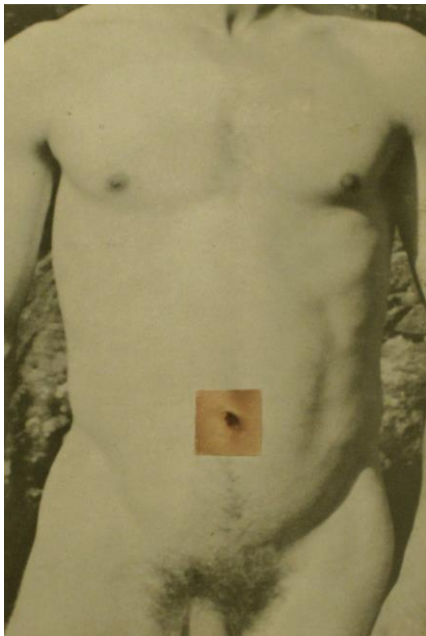


Joe Brainard, "Cinzano" (1974)

Brainard's delightfully memorable synthesis of modesty, ambition, inventiveness, and humor comes through in the exhibition *Joe Brainard: 100 Works* at Tibor de Nagy. Everyone who cares about art should see this show, not just because it will probably leave a smile on your face.

Walking through the exhibition, I was struck once again by Brainard's complete rejection of the tiresomely recycled myth of the artist as masculine hero. His subjects include 1930s actresses from Greta Garbor and Mae West to Anna May Wong and Dorothy Lamour; male nudes; household objects; disposable items (chewing gum wrappers and cigarette butts); flowers; madonnas; commercial packaging; the cartoonist Ernie Bushmiller and his cartoon character, Nancy; still-lifes; and well-known works of art. In fact, we should be wary of letting his humor obscure how much is going on in Brainard's collages — how multi-faceted his work is, or how quirky and particular his interests.

In addition to the collages are drawings in a variety of mediums, an etching, and a small selection of paintings. Brainard could be irreverent, funny, self-deprecating, tender, serious, sweet, satirical, and even kitschy. At times, as Jamie James pointed out, he “aimed for genial outrageousness.” He did not cloak his feelings in masculine tropes. He was openly gay, which he made apparent in his work, helping set a precedent for younger artists such as Louis Fratino and Brett Reichman.



Joe Brainard, “Untitled (Hard Body)” (1977), mixed media on paper, 5 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches

When it came to making collages, Brainard was an alchemist who only needed an X-Acto knife and glue to make something unexpected happen. While the exhibition includes several collages as large as 10 by 13 inches, a considerable number are less than 4 by 4 inches. The rest sit somewhere in between. Given that Brainard made larger works, as well as three-dimensional objects, the focus on modestly scaled wall works gives the show an

added wallop. In retrospect, Brainard is not given enough credit for either working small or being critical of monolithic works — what Thomas Nozkowski, another fiercely ambitious artist who began working on a modest scale in 1975, called “the elephant in the room.”

Many of the exhibition’s works have never been shown before. One group of collages features reproductions of 1930s movie actresses surrounded by floral images, as well as one of Tab Hunter, a blond, all-American heartthrob who starred in movies in the 1950s and ’60s, and had a hit single, “Young Love,” in 1957. Other collages are mysterious, such as an untitled one dated 1977, pairing penguins from a puzzle beneath a bunch of floating beach balls. His compositions go in different directions, ranging from images of an ashtray arranged in a grid to all-over concatenations of flowers to mismatched heads and bodies. Clearly, the artist had internalized a wide range of historical precedents.



Joe Brainard, “Untitled (Owl Cat)” (1971), mixed-media collage, 7 x 5 inches

What is remarkable about the exhibition is the gamut of possibilities he touches upon in his work. “Untitled (White Dog)” (1978) is a portrait of a dog’s head in gouache, watercolor, and graphite on paper; the dog’s white head is barely distinguishable from its similarly colored ground. The undated “Untitled (Portrait of Joe),” is a snapshot of himself surrounded by filtered cigarette butts. In contrast to celebrated collagists, such as Joseph Cornell and Robert Motherwell, Brainard never seemed to settle into a groove when it came to materials and imagery. His variousness is unprecedented. It seems that he wanted to both have no style and work in every style. He was a rare combination of inventive and

voracious. This too is important: He never wanted to become a brand or make signature works.

Both an artist and a writer, Brainard was remarkably protean. His widely admired book *I Remember* (1975), which inspired a number of writers, including the Oulipo genius, Georges Perec, is a minor masterpiece. He inspired John Ashbery to make collages again. It is high time for a large monograph on his work — larger than the one published on the occasion of his traveling retrospective in 2001, which is under 175 pages. It is a travesty that none exists. In Brainard's case more is better.

Joe Brainard: 100 Works *continues at Tibor de Nagy (15 Rivington Street, Manhattan) through May 26.*