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By Paul Moreno

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The art of Joe Brainard is having a moment.

Joe Brainard, who to some is better known as a writer and poet, was perhaps under appreciated as a visual artist. This tide appears to be turning. In October Rizzoli published *Joe Brainard: The Art of The Personal*, a beautiful monograph about Brainard's visual art. In the past year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art received a gift of 16 important works by Brainard, making the Met the largest public collection holder of Brainard's artwork, with 42 pieces. Word on the street is that an exhibition from their collection of Brainard works is on the drawing board. In November three works on paper by Brainard came up for auction at Sotheby's New York. The first, a mixed-media collage, with an estimate of \$5,000–\$7,000, achieved a winning bid of \$44,100. Then two drawings, both with estimates of \$2,000–\$3,000, sold for \$44,100 and \$94,500, respectively.

If you were in New York City this fall, you also would have had a chance to see a lovely jewel box of an exhibition of Brainard's work at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. The exhibition, called "Joe Brainard: a box of hearts and other works," consisted of 68 artworks. As someone familiar with Brainard's work would expect, the items ranged from not too large to very small. The largest pieces in the show were two untitled cut-paper works, one 29 x 23 inches, and the other, 29 x 23 ¾ inches. In each, paper is delicately cut into botanical silhouettes, and then the silhouettes are layered into a frame to create something that is at once a drawing and, in a way, a sculpture. The light in the room as well as the viewer's movement around the pieces create subtle shadows and motion. These works are vague monochromes when viewed in passing or from afar. But in his poem, "Out in the Hamptons," Brainard puts things this way:

*the late colors of autumn
subdued into subtle combinations
too intricate and transitory to pin down
unless perhaps with paint*

In both this passage and those two largest works from the show, Brainard captures an understanding of nature, as seen from a car passing along a country road. Or perhaps, to the urbane, they represent a nature that is beautiful for the way it's being interpreted, reframed, and presented in a gallery on a busy corner of Manhattan.

The exhibition took its title from one of the tiniest works in the show, (one of several in a vitrine in the middle of the gallery), *Untitled (Box of Hearts)*. It is 7 ½ inches x 6 inches, but one could imagine it even smaller. The checklist describes it as a "mixed media assemblage." I wonder if Brainard would have thought of this work in those terms. This work consists of many small elements displayed with the care of the most adroit prop stylist. A Swedish matchbox, the cardboard kind that

slides open, reveals a cache of little treasures, all heart shaped. One is a shiny red paper heart held in place with a tiny red plastic clothespin. One appears to be red felt. Three appear to be charms that would be at home on a bracelet: one pale blue enamel, one gold that feels slightly Catholic, and a silver one with a little plastic gem in it. There is also, hanging from a bit of string, a little scalloped paper tag decorated with a red paper heart. It is easy to assemble a fantasy of this little collection. It is easily something a young girl might have pulled together. Maybe a young boy even. But what does it mean when a grown man has amassed this small fortune of hearts? And was it meant as a tiny installation or was it just a peculiar petite keepsake? When did it become art?

When one thinks of sculpture being made in the mid-1970s (a likely approximate date for this matchbox piece), one might think of Robert Smithson's giant land sculptures, Richard Serra's early lead structures, or Barry Le Va's gallery-size scatters. In the air there was a shared notion of expanding the field, taking up space, challenging the viewer, proving something. Brainard, with the elegance of a poet, does not participate, does not desire to prove something. He is just showing, sharing, letting you in rather than taking you out. One does not feel that he was making a piece of work for consumption in the gallery world so much as just assembling a trove rich with personal meaning and reference. With his box of hearts, he embodies a vulnerability to letting the viewer speculate what memory each heart represents and to ponder how Joe got those Swedish matches. In this piece, he also points to something frequently present in his work: a celebration of queerness, an embracing of the sissy, a love for the pansy, a dignity for the nancy.

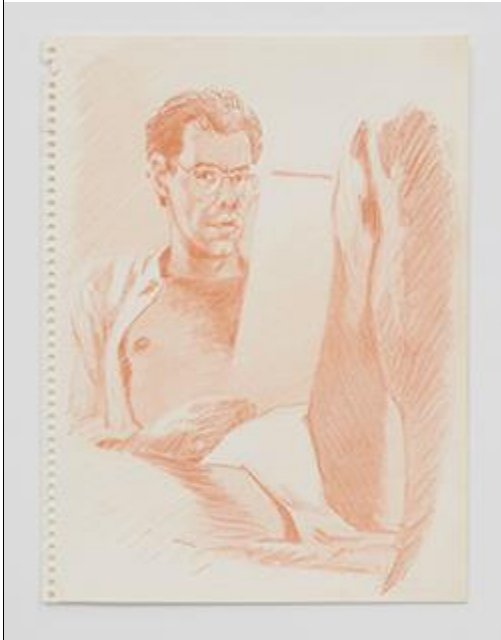
Pansies, of course, are blooming throughout the show. They are tucked into a gorgeous "mixed media collage" from 1966, *Flower Painting*, which, even within its title and description, presents an interesting challenge found in Brainard's work. His work is often crafty, feeling hand made; it is the most excellent example of the kind of art making that can stop just short of actually being art. He employs a skill set that is often reserved for beautiful hand-made greeting cards. Brainard, however, takes these humble forms and uses them with a wit, an irony, and a sincerity that transcends from itself to become a genuine formality that is austere but with a wink. *Flower Painting*, with its tension between brights and pastels, its visible scissor edges and marker ink, is as joyful as an Easter card (secular). But when you think of this work as an explosive rebuffing of being called a pansy, it suddenly has all the gravitas of an Easter card (religious).

More pansies are found nearby in a small, gorgeous oil painting, *Untitled (Pansies)*. Against a pale taupe and pink background, two small vessels contain one cut pansy each. One with a lion's face seems to stare back at the viewer, and another monochromatic violet-black one appears to glance over at the fancier one. This simple still life really appears to become comically figurative. On one pansy, a stem becomes an arm; on the other, a green bit of leaf suggests a hand. Each little flower appears to have a hand on a hip, flirtatious and sassy.

Nancies abound in an exuberant collage from about 1968 called *Untitled (The Avant-Garde)*. Held within a highly decorative frame, which seems to have been selected by the owner of the work as opposed to the artist himself, is a double-spread collage of iconic images from modern art. Warhol, Picasso, Matisse, Pollack, Mondrian, Manet, and others are represented. But each image contains an intervention in the form of Nancy, from the Ernie Bushmiller comic. A screaming Nancy appears stuck in a Mondrian square. Picasso's *Woman Ironing* now has Nancy's exasperated frown. Nancy contentedly snuggles another Nancy in Courbet's *Le Sommeil*. Brainard is challenging, if not daring, the viewer to get all the references, both high and low, coyly setting a trap in which, if a fella gets all the references, Joe knows the fella might be a bit of a nancy too. It is very smart and subversive.

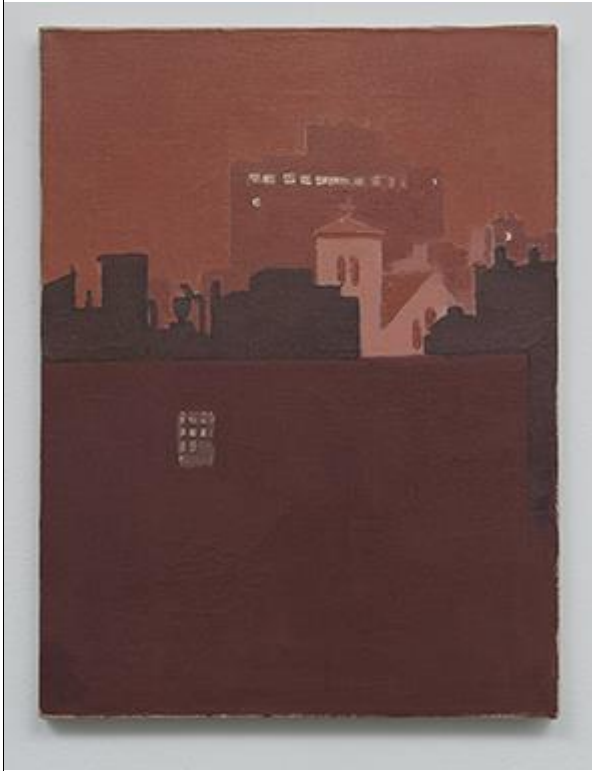


In and among Brainard's jests, there is not only poignancy but also simply lovely painting and drawing. A subtly erotic Conté crayon self-portrait, a deadpan portrait of Jasper Johns, and a monochromatic oil painting, *Untitled (Whippoorwill)*, all express a seriousness of purpose that exists in tension with an air of improvisation, as if one just snapped these images, as one might today, with their phone.



Joe Brainard, (Left) *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*, c. 1972. Conte crayon on paper, 11 3/4 x 9 inches. (Center) Jasper Johns, 1972. Graphite on paper 14 x 10 5/8 inches. (Right) *Untitled (Whippoorwill)*, 1974. Oil on canvas board, 20 x 24 inches. Photos: Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Two standout paintings are a pair of related cityscapes from 1978, *Soho at Dusk* and *Soho at Night*. The Rizzoli monograph on Brainard shows a third, similar painting, *Untitled (Soho Window View I)*. All three of these oils on canvas portray the same view at different times of day. The daytime painting is filled with a haze that covers a large brick wall, below a flurry of architectural detail, below a blue-gray sky. The dusk painting captures the glorious moment of crimson light that sometimes fills Manhattan. The buildings in the painting are reduced to silhouettes ranging from a pale salmon to a deep rusty brown. The night painting brings back some architectural detail while maintaining the reduction of form into blocks of plum, putrid yellow-purple, and graying aubergine. The paintings are crowded with buildings, but not a person is visible. In all paintings the Holland Plaza Building and the now demolished Church of St. Alphonsus Liguori are identifiable landmarks of time and place. In the dusk painting, what might be a random window appears on the large brick wall in the foreground. The window is not there in the other two. Is it just a sunset reflection of the westerly facing window from which these paintings are being made? This moment of refracted light is one in which Brainard quietly inserts himself into the city. This gesture captures something important about a young gay man who left small-town life for New York City both to be an artist and just to live his life unencumbered—the struggle to forge an identity and the desire for and struggle against anonymity.



John Brainard (Left) Soho at Dusk, 1978. Oil on canvas 16 x 12 inches. (Right) Soho at Night, 1978. Oil on canvas 16 x 12 inches. Photos: Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

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