Surprise, 2017

How to feel human

The paintings of Brenda Goodman

Words and Photography Kate Orne

Balancing Act, 2018

"Every painting starts with scratches embedded in the surface. From there it becomes a totally intuitive journey where one shape of color informs another shape and another shape until it all comes together in a cohesive painting. I don't always know what they are about or what they mean but what I do know is that they feel RIGHT. When that happens they have what is most necessary – heart, humanness, and a non specific narrative in which the viewer can find their own meaning." – BRENDA GOODMAN

Detroit was a hard place to grow up. 'Don't get too close,' that was my Detroit look. People ran the other way when they saw me. I still put it on if I'm walking down the street and I'm feeling threatened. I still think I'm tough, but I'm nothing like I used to be. I've learned how to use my humor in a way where I could say things that, at one time, would've offended someone, and it would've been a real scene. Whereas, now, I use my humor in a way that doesn't offend anyone. I still like to banter but, in Detroit, I was sarcastic all the time, everyone was. It's just a way of not being vulnerable."

It's the second time I've met artist Brenda Goodman, the first was a two minute encounter at the booth of Jeff Bailey Gallery, at the New Art Dealers Alliance fair, so I'm not sure that counts. I've barely crossed the threshold of the home she shares with her partner, Linda Dunne, the former dean of the New School, in New York City, and I get an earful from Goodman about how she doesn't like the new uncoated paper stock of *Upstate Diary*, "The one before was much better. The matte paper washes out the colors. It's bad for paintings." There is something to be said for honest people, they're easier to understand. Goodman definitely likes to banter.

When I was an arts student sometimes I would fall asleep on a stool, painting. I mean, that was all I did.

Her new studio, the largest she's had so far, is built into the side of a hill on a beautiful property located in the Catskills region. The thick concrete walls cancel out any noise — even the slightest sound. "It's a little scary, I can't hear Linda, in case of an emergency, nor can I hear the cars go by, nor when Raven barks... Before I started working in here, when Trump had just been elected, I said that everyone could use my bunker. It might eventually turn back into a bunker, if he keeps it up." (Laughing)

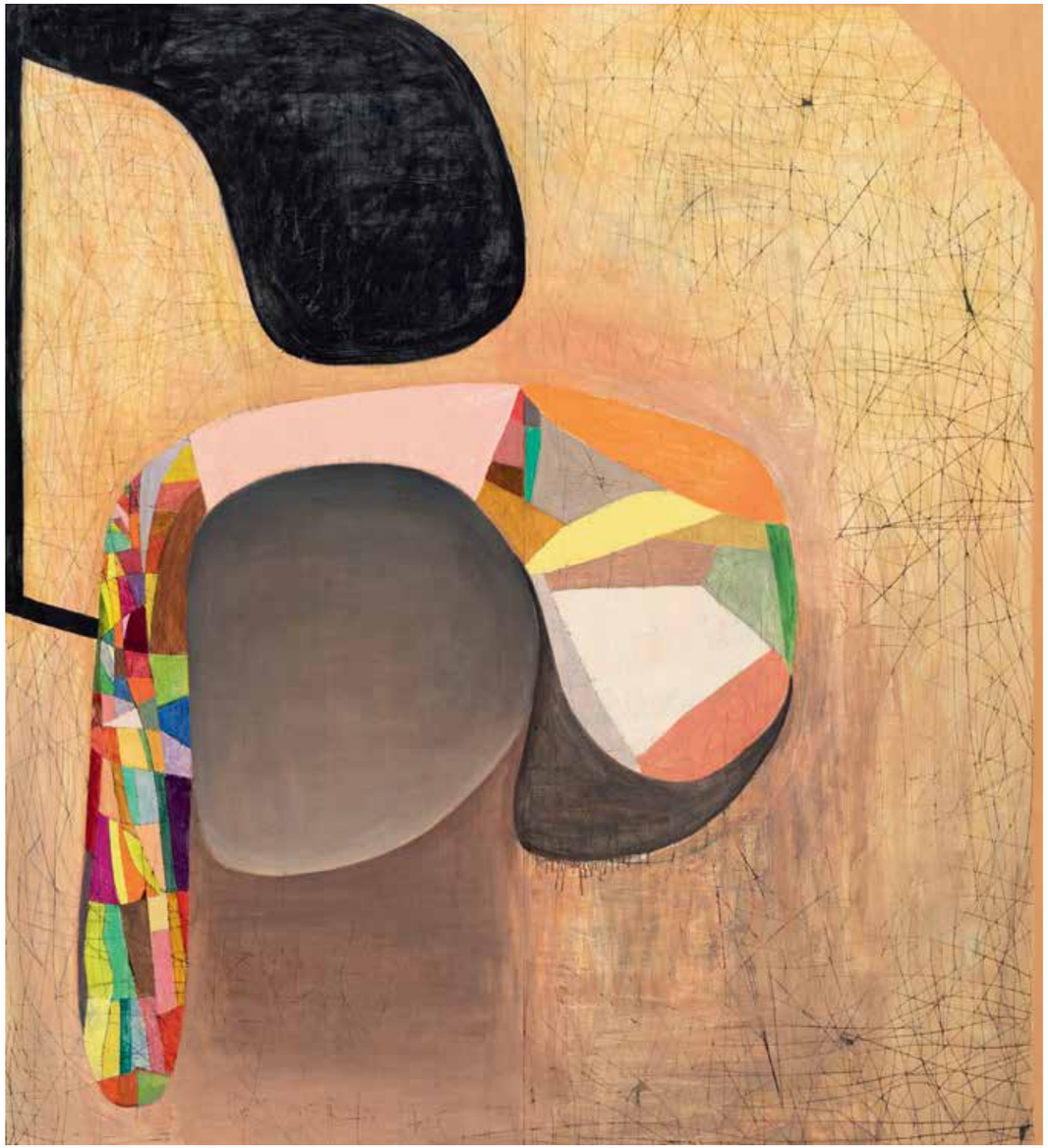
The couple moved there full-time in '09, after living on the Bowery, in NYC, for 30 years. "On the Bowery we had low ceilings and it was always dark in there, and full of soot. We went back a couple of days ago; I got grouchy all over again. There's horns honking, there's construction everywhere. I said, 'I paid my dues with all of that.' The Bowery was real quiet when I first moved there in '76, and then the Chinese took over, and the Italians moved out. And there were more and more people. I would run downstairs and yell at the trucks that kept their motor running all night, with the A/C. (Laughing) I do miss the galleries, and I miss having a variety of restaurants. It was nice to go in for the day and then come back. So, I'm much happier up here."

The millennial generation's expression "crushing" sums up how I feel about Goodman's recent series of paintings. There is such beauty in those mostly unidentifiable yet strangely familiar shapes — they resonate deeply. Overlapping these forms, and the stunning color palette, are scratches cut into the wood upon which she paints. These lines, these cuts, grow more significant as one steps closer — echoing a myriad of emotions we all experience — raw and intimately exposed, the shared internal language of human kind.

"I'm not an intellectual. I don't understand abstract work. You would think, looking at these paintings, that I would be able to grasp abstract thoughts and stuff like that... abstract art is like, death to me. I have no idea what to do with it. I never really spent time studying art history, like a lot of artists do. I just went to see the things that I really resonated with, like Philip Guston, Chaim Soutine, James Ensor and Giorgio Morandi. And that's how I learned how to paint. They were my influences. But I know artists who could talk for days about the history of this and that, which, most of the time, makes no sense to me."

An intriguing aspect regarding Goodman is that, throughout her 50-plus year career, she has worked and lived rather isolated from the world. She rarely went out to seek inspiration or to experience stuff. Instead, she stayed in her studio, painting and drawing. "Compared to most people I have experienced very little in my life," says the artist, soon to be 75.

Opposite page: *Entwined*, 2018.
Above: Brenda in her studio with *Let the Match Begin*, 2017, to her left.



Impending, 2018

> What I see in this new work is that it's less in-your-gut emotional than some of my other work... there's clarity now, which I think has never before been in the work.

"When I was an arts student, I would be in school 'til four o'clock, and then I'd go to Greek Town for some coffee — then start all over again. Sometimes I would fall asleep on a stool, painting. I mean, that was all I did. I still don't do very much. I didn't get involved with politics or the feminism movement... People say, 'Well don't you remember ... ?' And I go, 'Nope.' I never got involved with music; not even the Beatles. I mean — nothing, nada, zero. Except for what I may have watched on TV once in a while, I was just totally focused on my work, and that's the only thing I knew. Weird, huh?"

My sense is that Goodman exists in her own distinct center, that's her world, and rather than travel outwards, she'd much rather travel inwards, where she draws her inspiration. It's as simple as that.

Goodman got involved with other artists for a time, in the '70s, when she joined the Cass Corridor art movement, one of the only major 20th-century fine art trends to emerge from Detroit. "My work was different from the rest of the group. They were doing really tough, aggressive work, like the Detroit look, with bullet holes and wire. And at the time I was doing my personal diary paintings. But I was respected and the group had a good reputation. But outside of that... there was all this music that happened during those years. I mean Linda knows every song — she can sing them all. The only political experience I had was when I went to DC to see the first AIDS Quilt. And I didn't even want to do that, but my friend said, 'Oh, come on, let's do it.'"

"The only time I remember being affected by something from outside is during the Cuban Missile Crisis, in '63, when we were on the brink of a nuclear war. I remember getting into bed and my teeth were chattering. That felt very scary to me, that the world might come to the end." "What about 9/11?" I ask. "That was different. We were living right there on the Bowery. But it didn't feel like it was going to be the end of the world." She is indeed a tough broad — and a prolific artist.

"When I'm in the studio I'm focused and I'm very clear. I mean, I think when you've been painting for over 50 years... you know all of the ... not all perhaps, but I know a lot of things that I shouldn't do to make a good painting, and clearly one of my passions is experimenting with different tools. I think those tools are ... different tools bring out different emotions. So, if I'm in a particular place and I'm feeling a certain way, I want to express that — I go to the tools that I think are going to express it best. It's just all intuitive. When it feels right, it just feels right. I know it's right and that's how I can tell. It's interesting to me that some artists use the same tools throughout their whole career, like a paintbrush and a canvas."

Double Trouble, 2017

"What I see in this new work ... is that it's less in-your-gut emotional than some of my other work, when I painted those dark voices." Listening to her speak, the work that comes to mind is Goodman's decades long series of self-portraits, which are filled with self-loathing, rage, fear, and vulnerability. In *Self Portrait 13*, 1994, her overweight, chalky, bold figure gorges on an unidentifiable substance. "Those dark voices, yeah, I don't have a need to go to those places anymore, I've done that, and I just feel I'm in a different place now. There's clarity now, which I think has never before been in the work. It doesn't have to be gut wrenching... Well, I wasn't always convinced of that... because from the time I started painting everything was a visual diary of what was going on in my life, and people sort of expected that from me. So to go from that to something like this was very scary to me. I mean, are the paintings going to affect people the way my work has always affected people? Would I lose my whole audience? But I have found that's not true — I've gained an audience, actually. My friend Marie said, 'There's a humanness in them, and that's enough.' And that felt like 'Oh, I can live with that.' As long as you can still feel me in the work, and there's humanness in there; that it doesn't have to be someone dying or me being in a dark place or whatever. And I've come to appreciate that." ■

See Goodman's solo show Jan. 24th - Feb. 23rd, 2019 at sikkemajenkinsco.com Art courtesy of the artist and baileygallery.com