

INTERVIEW

Beer With a Painter: Melissa Brown

"I want to visualize the fact that, despite our perception, reality is changeable," the Brooklyn-based artist said of her paintings.



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Melissa Brown in her Brooklyn studio (photo Jennifer Samet/*Hyperallergic*; all other photos Adam Reich, courtesy the artist)

Melissa Brown has worn cat-eye makeup every day since she was a teenager. I can't help but associate it with her paintings, where the sacred and profane converge amid mirrored surfaces, shop windows, psychics' tables, and bedroom altars. The cat-eye flick is dramatic and powerful, dating back to ancient Egypt, where women wore mineral liner for its health properties and as protection against the evil eye.

To connote the layering of our daily experience, Brown collages a spectrum of techniques: photography, plein-air painting, CMYK printing, airbrush, and stencil. Sometimes her paintings come with QR codes that send the viewer to an animation. Her painting "Commute" (2020) shows a hand with long fingers and press-on nails spinning shiny meditation balls in an otherwise empty pandemic-era subway car passing in front of the Brooklyn Bridge, a glowing orb of sunlight visible through the window. A painted strobe effect animates the fingers and the reflective balls — a nod to British Vorticist painter Sybil Andrews.



Melissa Brown, "Commute" (2020), flashe, acrylic and oil on Dibond

Brown's studio is on the second floor of a building in Flatbush, Brooklyn, with a busy deli in the storefront and a braiding salon upstairs. The experience of visiting is a bit like walking into one of her paintings, where the mundane and the performative elements of beauty rituals collide through glass shop windows. Last month, we met there to talk about her favorite Renaissance painting, the magic of encountering motifs while walking around the city, finding answers in flotsam, and how paintings can manifest experience.

Melissa Brown was born in 1974 in Morristown, New Jersey, and received her BFA in Printmaking from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and her MFA in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University. Brown also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2000. She is currently a professor at Lehman College of the City University of New York and co-curated a two-venue group exhibition, *Does This Taste Funny? Humor in Contemporary Art*, on view at Lehman College Art Gallery and the Gallery at Heimbold Visual Arts Center at Sarah Lawrence College. Brown's recent solo exhibition, *Window Shopping*, was presented in New York at Derek Eller Gallery, where she has exhibited since 2017.

Hyperallergic: *How did you connect with art as a young person, and what brought you to RISD?*

Melissa Brown: I was born in New Jersey, where all of my family is from, but I grew up near Philadelphia. When my parents first moved from New Jersey to Philadelphia, we had an apartment in Center City, near the Ben Franklin Museum. It had recently been updated for the Bicentennial. There was an infinity mirror room with a lot of neon, and an interactive room with phones that you could pick up and listen to someone from history. There was also a glass harmonica. As a child, I was constantly asking to go there and my mom would take me. I even went through a phase where I wanted to be called "Ben Franklin." We visited his print shop a million times. It must have had an influence.

When it came time to visit colleges, one of them was RISD. I was seduced by it, and that was the determining factor. I went into their Woods-Gerry Gallery and felt it was where I wanted to be.

H: *I know you studied printmaking there; who did you work with?*

MB: Cornelia McSheehy was my thesis advisor, and she encouraged me to pursue anything and everything. She saw printmaking as a mode in the world, operating outside of a narrow bandwidth. I wanted to make a billboard and she suggested I write to the company who leased the space on the highway. They gave it to me for free, and I made a fake advertisement for guinea pig food. It was a good lesson in finding an opportunity where there is none.

So much of printmaking is about a small scale, but if you look at the history, there is density and maxed-out information. I like how the linework looks, and how the dot looks. I was interested in seeing that on a large scale, even larger than painting. That has continued to be a central motivation: considering how to bring print texture into painting.



Melissa Brown, "Upstate Clouds Gathering" (2020), flashe, acrylic and oil on Dibond

H: *I was thinking about road and billboard culture in your work. Does it relate to the motif of the rearview mirror, which is present in your paintings from 2018 to 2020?*

MB: I have always liked the rearview motif because it represents the past, present, and future in a single view. You are moving forward and looking behind, to the side, dialing in the radio, looking at the map, looking at your phone, imagining your destiny, you're in outer space mentally — all these things at once. I'm interested in the onslaught of multiple realities.

Sandro Botticelli's "Scenes from The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti" (1483) at the Museo del Prado is important to me. It depicts a gruesome vengeance story of unrequited love. But I am interested in it as a phenomenon in Renaissance painting – an early example of an artist attempting to represent multiple aspects of time simultaneously. You see the scene from different vantage points, and how a prior event influenced the current moment. This is a complicated thing to represent in a painting. You can connect it to the multiverse theory: Every moment can result in infinite outcomes. Botticelli was studying esoteric philosophy and reading Marsilio Ficino, a philosopher and occultist who influenced Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. The complexities of mysticism are a factor in his painting.

H: *In your paintings, you combine and collage your own photography with airbrush, impasto, and other techniques. Can you tell me more about the process?*

MB: That is the recipe. It is about trying to represent what our current reality feels like. It is made up of different textures: observation, iPhone photographs, and memories. Often, the first layer is my photograph, then it is my memory of the photograph, then I'm trying to recreate my memory of the photograph. All these different permutations are breaking down and degrading.

I collect vintage postcards, and I had collected several of the Bonaventure Hilton in Los Angeles. When I finally went there, it was a trippy experience to stand in front of it after having looked at so many images of the building. To make that painting, I collaged a wobbly-cut photograph along with loose painting. It became a mashup of experience. I was hamming it up to make it extra trippy.



Melissa Brown, "Music Inn" (2026), flashe, oil, acrylic, photo silkscreen on Dibond

H: *What inspired your recent paintings of New York City shop windows?*

MB: I would go on long walks around the city and identify windows that I wanted to paint. They are so fascinating; a little theater trying to grab your attention. The surface is complicated, like a collage: reflecting the city, along with the view inside.

Being seduced to buy a pair of shoes because you walked past the store and saw them and needed them is a dying art form now being replaced by ads that track your behavior. I was interested in pointing a finger at it. I also hold a lot of value in synchronicity — being in the right place at the right time, or chance encounters.

H: *You have also made many paintings that show fortune tellers, psychics, and tarot cards. Is this connected to a general interest in mysticism and the occult?*

MB: I've always thought our perception of reality is impaired and incomplete, like wearing sunglasses in a blacklight room. First, I read *Thought-Forms* by Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, and this led me to read occult philosophy. Phenomenology appears in your day-to-day life in the most mundane way. There's nothing more exciting to me than thinking a trip to the corner deli is a symbolic experience, potentially filled with insight into your life on Earth as you're reaching for a chocolate bar.

I think about how, as an artist, you can walk around in your daily life and suddenly a motif emerges. It is almost like you're running into a fortune. I'm calling attention to that by bringing in cards, the tarot, and other symbols of fortune-telling.

I have wandered through the Louis XV period room in the Wrightsman Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art a million times. But one day, I walked in and realized I wanted to paint the mirrors, reflected in one another. That painting, "Echoing Past / The Persistence of the Future" (2025), became a representation of my process. I was painting the same thing over and over again and degrading it. This is how an infinity mirror works — the tunnel effect comes from the light getting dimmer and dimmer as it bounces back and forth.



Melissa Brown, "Psychic Window" (2025), flashe, oil, silkscreen, acrylic on Dibond

H: *Several of your paintings reference lunar cycles, and you also make moon-phase calendars. How do you use them?*

MB: I started making the calendars four years ago when I began paying attention to lunar cycles, which are obviously a huge influence on humankind. Mainly, I wanted to look up at the sky and feel a connection to the passing of time.

There is a system, which is present in many spiritual practices, about using the moon for setting intentions and observing time passing based on its phases. I was using an app, and I didn't like how the apps were visualizing it. So I designed a calendar with a backwards winding spiral. It starts on the bottom, marking the new moon, and then revolves around marking each quarter in terms of your intentions for the month. It keeps you looking up at the sky, and it keeps you questioning, "What is my intent?" The month is over in the blink of an eye.

H: *I love the painting "Getting Ready" (2020), in which a can of hairspray becomes a flamethrower for a candle on top of a dresser, with a slightly ajar drawer full of colorful underwear. What does it signify?*

MB: I have made several paintings staged in front of my circular bedroom mirror, which becomes a daily altar. There I have objects, photographs of family and favorite artworks, and it is where I start the day. It is a moment of combustion, or like the *Saturday Night Live* spoof, Stuart Smalley's daily affirmations. "I am good enough, I am smart enough, and doggone it, people like me." You look into the mirror and you psych yourself up for the day. I made the painting "Getting Ready" just before starting to work on a solo show. As the painter EJ Hauser would say, "You have to get your art dick up." You have to muster the bravado and the confidence to give it your all.



Melissa Brown, "Getting Ready" (2019), flashe, acrylic and oil on Dibond

H: *Can you tell me more about your performance work and the poker tournaments you have organized during your exhibitions?*

MB: I have a theory about reality: that whatever happens is partially odds, which is the history of what's come before. Then, there is chance, and finally, there is your own will and intent. That is what poker is about. And it is such a good analogy of what it means to be an artist.

I organize poker tournaments with about six artists at a table. Each person has wagered one artwork. It's a winner-take-all game, so the winner comes away with a mini-collection. The individual artwork is a piece of currency in and of itself. It is not converted into market value.

I have also staged a performance called “Bagomancy,” which is based on lithomancy, an ancient fortune-telling technique that was used to predict strategy in the Trojan War. You draw a circle and throw rocks named for the planets and read how they fall in relationship to one another. I take that system and apply it to objects in my purse. I also have done a version called “Flotsomancy” with the artist Marie Lorenz on her [Tide and Current Taxi](#), where, on Instagram Live, we will take people’s questions and provide answers by reading the garbage floating in the waterways.



Melissa Brown, “Moon Work” (2024), flashe, oil, acrylic, and embedded video via QR on Dibond

H: *Is your use of different mediums aimed at expanding what constitutes a painting?*

MB: Not exactly. I came to painting in a roundabout way. I see being an artist as a holistic endeavor that can move into whatever dimension it needs to, based on the idea.

Print has a built-in democratic, pedestrian, universal element that I have always been interested in. I think about tapping into a common experience and looking at what is overlooked, uncanny, and absurd.

Performance, like the poker game, is all about the moment of shared experience; the artwork is the memory of having been there. Animation adds time into painting and allows you to work with sound. Some of my paintings have animations embedded in them via QR codes. It is a part of the painting that you can take with you.

At some point, I realized painting is the right medium to talk about specific things. Painting is like a cutout: one human’s view of what reality can be, contained in a rectangle. Paintings are also a collage of experience. In my work, I layer how I remember something, how I’ve observed something, and how I’ve photographed something. But then, some paintings have an additional element. They represent a fantasy: showing how I might envision experience, and how it can manifest. I want to visualize the fact that, despite our perception, reality is changeable.