



*Self Portrait in Fur Hat*  
1972  
Di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art

# Joan Brown

**San Francisco native** Joan Brown went to SFAI on a whim—she applied with a portfolio of sketches of movie stars copied from fan mags. She was unhappy at the school until she met Elmer Bischoff, who encouraged her to “paint from inside”: to use both her lived life and her interior life as the subjects of her work. Her kitchen, her family, her dogs appear in her early work, in the heavy impasto and rich coloration typical of her teachers and colleagues at SFAI in the 1950s.

Brown got a lot of attention early on in what was still considered a man’s world. In 1960, when she was 22, she had her first show in New York and was the youngest person ever represented in what has become the Whitney Biennial. She was featured in *Mademoiselle* magazine.

But by the late 1960s, Brown had become dissatisfied with her thick, dark, works. She gave up her NY gallery contract and devoted two years to studying and refining her technique. She became interested in the Asian and Indian art at the de Young’s Avery Brundage Collection. When she began to exhibit again, both style and subject are radically different, and we feel that we’re entering another time, place, and mood. Self portraits in many guises appear.

She moved from oil on canvas to enamel on Masonite, making images flatter and more brittle. Skilled drafting, rather than just color application, became important, as she created representational images from dreams, from her interests in life—like swimming to Alcatraz, and dancing—and from her study of mythology. Humans, animals, and human-animal combinations are now in more two-dimensional space, in lighter colors. She plays with the creation of three-dimensional space and acknowledges pictorial illusionism, and delights in juxtaposing rigid structures, like the checkerboard behind her in “Self Portrait in a Fur Hat,” with the wild explosion of the fur. Even her paint-stained shirt is held in check by white lines of stitching.

By the end of the 1970s, the symbolic nature of her work had deepened. She made frequent trips to India and began to create sculptural forms. In 1990, she and two assistants died while installing an obelisk in a temple in Puttapparthi, India. She was 52 years old.



## To Learn More:

*Art/Women/California*, Diana Burgess Fuller, Daniela Salvioni, editors, University of California Press, 2002

*The Art of Joan Brown*, Karen Tsujimoto, Jacqueline Baas, University of California Press, 1998

*Bay Area Figurative Art 1950-1965*, Caroline A. Jones, University of California Press, 1990

*Making Their Mark. Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-1985*, Randy Rosen, Catherine C. Brower, editors, Abbeville Press, 1989

*Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980*, Thomas Albright, University of California Press, 1985

## To See More:

SFMOMA, de Young Museum, Oakland Museum of California, Crocker Museum, di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art, LACMA, UC Davis Manetti Shrem Museum of Art