



CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

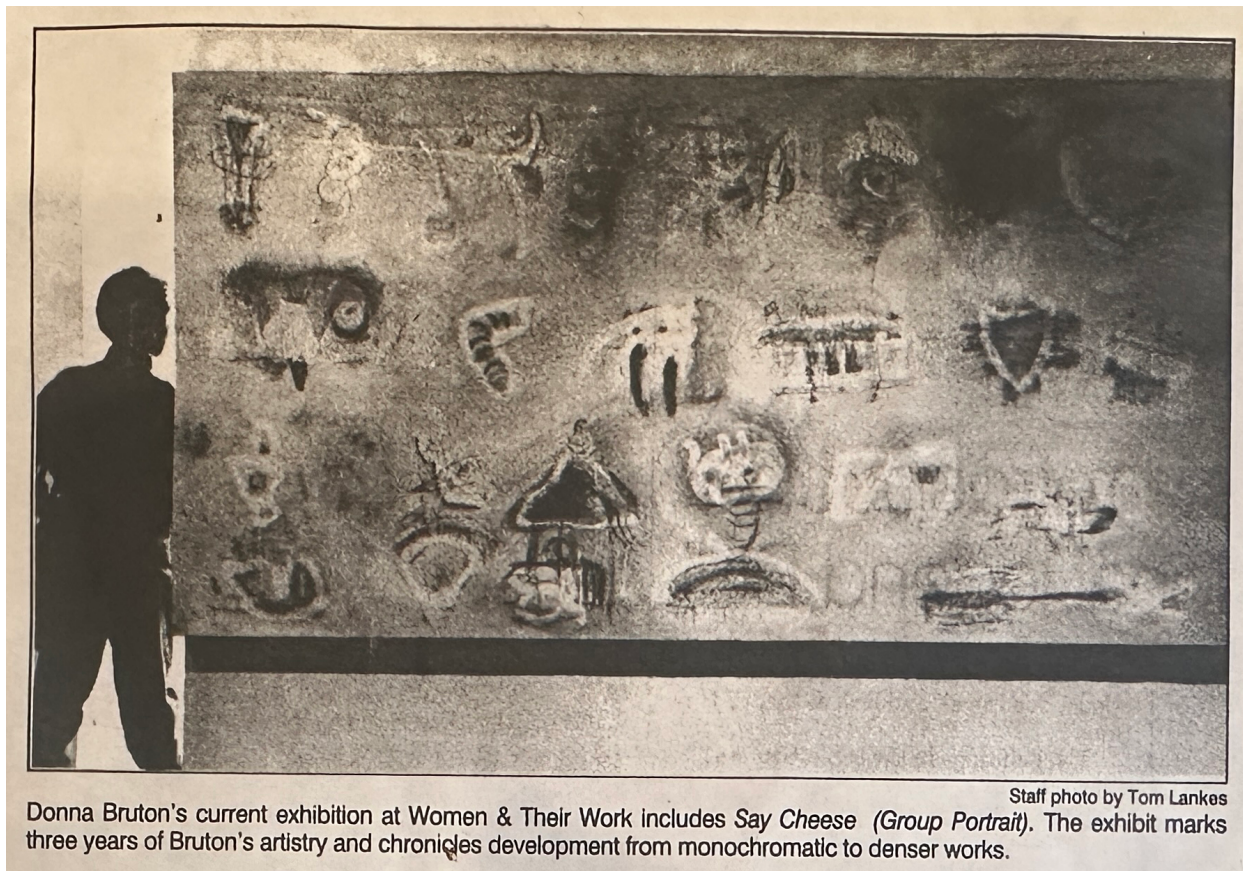
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Viewing of artist's work insightful

Visual arts

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Entering Donna Bruton's current exhibition at Women & Their Work is like obtaining access to the inner workings of the artist's mind — although there is no key to the conundrum of shapes, squiggles and marks that populate her massive paintings. Each is like an archaeological site in which the passage of time has both covered and revealed multiple layers of activity. The



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exhibition represents three years of work and chronicles Bruton's development from quiet monochromatic works with minimal imagery to increasingly denser works which gradually acquire recognizable shapes and images as well as more vivid and varied color.

The earliest work in the exhibition also is the first painting one sees upon entering the gallery. *Cropped Soul Survivor* (1990) is a large, mostly black painting from which a white, ghost-like form emerges as if to greet visitors at the door. The surface of this work, which at first glance appears flat, is highly worked and varied. Patches of paint have been scraped and rubbed away, exposing not only the white paint below, but also the brown masonite panel on which the work is painted. Scratches and scrawls cover the entire face of *Cropped Soul Survivor*, like graffiti etched in the wall of a worn building exterior.

In 1991 and 1992, Bruton began introducing more color into her paintings — sometimes within a darker palette, as in *Sepulcher Hum* and *Hope and Sport: 40 Interest*, and at other times with great intensity, as exemplified by *Current Wisdom*. The latter is dominated by bright black and built up with patches of black and silver. While *Current Wisdom* is characterized by Bruton's peculiar form of mark-making, the overall surface is thicker and rich with paint.

There are two works in Bruton's show where it appears that she began taking the scribbles from her drawing book and putting them directly into her paintings. In *Say Cheese (Group Portrait)*, individual drawings that combine white paint and graphite are lined up along three horizontal rows covering a white surface. Each drawing is like a separate, individual thought. Each is deliberate and highly worked, but no one can be deciphered. It is as if Bruton were trying to communicate her most private thoughts and feelings, but the words and images of our common language were inadequate.

Similarly, *Every Time It Rains, More Nails Come to the Surface* suggests the difficulty of language through incomprehensible glyphs that run horizontally across the picture plane. Unlike *Say Cheese*, however, this painting includes not only recognizable images of classical architecture, but also found objects. A brown horizontal strip with white vertical stripes at the top of the painting suggests the frieze of a Greek temple. Attached to each strip is a rusty nail, each a different size and shape. Within the body of the painting is a shadow of a building and architectural renderings of Ionic and Doric columns. The odd placement of the images below the frieze suggest a dream-like state and, together with the title, indicate the mystery of meaning and the impossibility of clarity.

Dreams are further suggested in *Day Words Dream Titles* (1992), a large, colorful painting which features a bed at the center. The gridiron work of the head and foot boards, as well as the bright hues, are reminiscent of Matisse, although the intensity of the work's surface is characteristic of Bruton. The horizontals and verticals of the bed's framework give this painting structure, while the stuff of the artist's hand and mind swirl about.



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In this work, the artist has made a gigantic leap in terms of her courage with color, combining bright greens, purples, yellows, blues and reds. The surface of the work has become even more rich, as well-packed with scribbles, scratches, washes and scrapes. It is as if everywhere you can see Bruton pouring out her mind, in a chaotic disorder that suggests the unconscious.

This is not to say that Bruton's works are solely about the unconscious mind. The density of these paintings has accumulated over months of work. What remains on the surface is a document of both mental and physical activity over an extended period.

The most recent paintings in the show witness another giant leap in the artist's work.

In *After Thoughts*, a significantly smaller work than the others, Bruton not only continues to use bright hues, but has added swatches of fabric. These strips of material cut across the surface of the painting in horizontal bands that simultaneously break apart the work and blend in.

In *Lamentations*, Bruton continues to use fabric and also includes pennies, which cover the long horizontal surface like a grid. On the right is an old-fashioned pink bathtub, with cut-outs of floral fabric and Bruton's scrawls above. On the left, a nun stares out an open window. The squiggles above her head are like thoughts hovering over her. Could this be the artist herself?

Where Bruton will go from here is unclear. Will she continue to admit recognizable imagery into her work? If so, will she be able to maintain the ambiguity that is a source of power in her work? Bruton is just two years out of the Master of Fine Arts program at Yale and she has been in Austin a little over a year as a painting instructor at the University of Texas. Clearly her work has grown in the short time she has been here. Hopefully, she will stay in Austin for many years to come and continue to share with us the strength of her vision.

Donna Bruton's one-person exhibition, "Lamentations," continues at Women and Their Work through May 16.