

Sarah Meyers Brent

# Primal Garden

Essay by Katherine French







**A Wish**Tryptic, 3 panels, each 6 x 6 inches
Mixed Media on Board, 2008

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Flowers are dangerous subjects for painters. In the wrong hands, they are cloyingly sweet or blatantly sexual. They recall a kind of feminine delicacy that belies tough-mindedness. They avoid swagger and strut. We do not expect to be challenged by paintings that reference flowers, but artist Sarah Meyers Brent is quick to set us straight. In her mysterious gardens of growth and decay, we see evidence of hard intellect. There is nothing overly pretty about gnarled and twisted roots, or in the ooze of rotting plants. But Brent transforms decomposing muck into a thing of beauty, convincing us of her ability to make paintings that are sublime.

Painting begins as desire, which is perfectly embodied in Brent's triptych *A Wish*. Early work reveals an ecstatic, almost primal vision of landscape. *Swirling Reflection by the Pond* and *Swirling Couple* might well represent Adam and Eve before their expulsion from heaven.

Above *Woman in a Garden III*44 x 38 inches
Acrylic on Canvas, 2007

Below **Swirling Couple** 63 x 35 inches Acrylic and Pastel on Canvas, 2007





Woman in a Garden III could be the painter herself. Brent references some of the best here—De Kooning, Cecily Brown and Joan Mitchell—who all embraced gestural painting as a way to describe place. But when she incorporates actual plant material, she invites the "viewer to experience what is alive and physical," both in nature and as part of creative activity. The seed head in the first panel of A Wish embodies the hope any artist might feel when beginning a work. A gentle puff and seeds are released across second and third panels. A wish has been made and we are witness to a process that offers no guarantee of success.



**Swirling Reflection by the Pond** 63 x 51 inches Acrylic on Canvas, 2007

Educated at the University of New Hampshire, and twice resident at the Vermont Studio Center, Brent has been surrounded by enough nature to inspire her use of organic matter. Yet incorporation of sticks, seeds, and sand is more than simply using what comes to hand. Grounded in a great tradition of contemporary painting that includes such artists as Anselm Kiefer, Joan Snyder and John Walker, Brent is propelled by deep emotion, particularly in her concern for the environment. While inherently appealing, her paintcovered flowers cannot be seen as merely decorative. Instead, the handful of grit in Beauty and the Beast is a thoughtfully considered part of Brent's profound desire to explore all "the contradictions embedded in life experience: growth and decay, beauty and ugliness, joy and sorrow."

Rejuvenation 18 x 24 inches Mixed Media on Canvas 2008





Living and Dead shows flowers blooming in a dark place, but this bleak observation was the foundation for her earlier painting *Rejuvenation*. Brent is determined to create art that is part of a continuing narrative; one with a capacity to sustain and renew itself.

Left

The Living and the Dead

34 x 26 inches

Flowers, Mixed Media on Canvas, 2009

Right

Beauty and the Beast

48 x 32 inches

Dirt, Acrylic, and Pastel on Board,
2009





Hanging Plant
66 x 48 inches
Acrylic, Plant, and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2010



Overgrown Canvas IV
9.5 x 21 inches
Acrylic, Flowers, and Mixed Media on
Panel, 2010



The Beauty Within
15 x 11 inches
Mixed Media on Linen, 2011



At some point flowers take over and burst from the confines of Brent's picture plane. Growth and Decay is discrete. Blossoms that escape from a bouquet thrown carelessly aside indicate where the artist is heading. Overgrown roots in Spewing Plant aggressively compete with the wall behind them for space. Here Brent sacrifices the benefit of working on a canvas at all. For Ooze Totem she scraped paint off her glass palette, sculpting the shavings into a rope that hung suspended from the ceiling. Liquid decay from Seep fills the corners of various rooms where it has been exhibited. The ability of this foul slime to adapt to any environment only underscores its meaning.

**Growth and Decay**27 x 49 inches
Acrylic, Flowers, and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2010



Spewing Plant 33 x 35 inches Mixed Media on Panel, 2011



Assemblage is a relatively new art form, and a precursor to installation. Although everyday material appeared in Dadaist works by Duchamp and Cubist constructions of Braque and Picasso, the term assemblage wasn't coined until Jean Dubuffet referred to his collages with butterfly wings as assemblage d'empreintes. Other artists were inspired to embark on similar flights of fancy, most famously Joseph Cornell who arranged stuffed birds within his surreal world of shadow boxes. Art historians cite Robert Rauschenberg or Edward Keinholz as the best-known practitioners of the form, but painters will find more in the work of such feminist artists as Snyder or Nancy Graves. First praised for life-size camels assembled from wax, burlap and real animal hide, Graves went on to make casts of natural objects. Then, perhaps inspired by Snyder's use of apothecary herbs, she incorporated twigs and seeds into her prints.

#### Seep

Variable 60 x 102 x 30 inches Acrylic and Mixed Media on Cloth, Wire, and Wood, 2011



Ooze
3 x 80 inches
Paint Shavings and Mixed Media, 2011



As a feminist, Brent understands that personal experience reveals the universal—and that our universe can be a nurturing, if somewhat risky place. When physical movement proved difficult during her first pregnancy, she concentrated on making the *Root* series. Created from observation, these darkly expressive charcoal drawings take a close look at a source of nourishment, not a bad thing to explore as one awaits the birth of a child.

**Root** 30 x 20 inches Charcoal, Paint, and Mixed Media on Panel, 2012





**Root II** 30 x 20 inches Charcoal and Mixed Media on Paper, 2012

Root III
30 x 20 inches
Charcoal and Mixed Media on Paper, 2012

A second, more challenging pregnancy found Brent focused on an *Ode to Pregnancy*. The spray foam in this mixed media work formed surprisingly organic shapes, making the finished Ode both aesthetically pleasing and physically light. Significantly, the work describes the artist's experience of highrisk pregnancy. Brent's paintings have always been about joy and sorrow at the beginning and end of life. Yet, forced to confront images revealed in the ultrasounds she received on a regular basis, her emotions intensified. "How crazy it is to have this life growing inside you," she later reflected, "and knowing at any moment it could end."



Ode to Pregnancy 39 x 76 inches Cloth and Mixed Media on Panel, 2014



After the birth of her second child, Brent confronts the emotional intensity of motherhood by creating two large mixed media works entitled *Mommy Loves Me* and *Mommy Loves Me II*. Breaking through the surface is the detritus of a household with children, the rubber gloves, wiping up cloths, a cotton shirt imprinted with the words "Mommy loves me..." Although reluctant to see these paintings as a depiction of birth, Brent admits that as an artist she seeks dramatic change and that childbirth is certainly dramatic. For her, *Mommy Loves Me* is an extension of the overgrown canvas and the time when she became more conscious of textiles and plants. "I love the richness of material," Brent confesses. "I love everything that belonged to my son that I brought to the studio...it just bursts out..."

Opposite page

Mommy Loves Me

48 x 36 inches

Paint Rags and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2014

Mommy Loves Me II 36 x 48 inches Paint Rags, Foam, Acrylic, and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2014



Growth and decay creep back into the conversation in works such as Living Paint and a reworking of Seep. Dismayed by how distant we are from nature, Brent knows that art can bring us back again. Her most recent work is less pretty and perhaps less accessible; we find fewer flowers and more grit. The broken straw of The Beauty Within or shredded fibers of Living Paint not only recall the emotive power of Kiefer, but also ground us. Brent invites viewers to a visionary garden, but then leads us past its deceptive tranquility to explore primal fear, anxiety, and joy—all the basic components of an emotional life that inspires us to look beyond ourselves.

Living Paint
68 x 228 inches
Acrylic, Rags, Foam, Gloves, Plant Material,
and Mixed Media, 2014

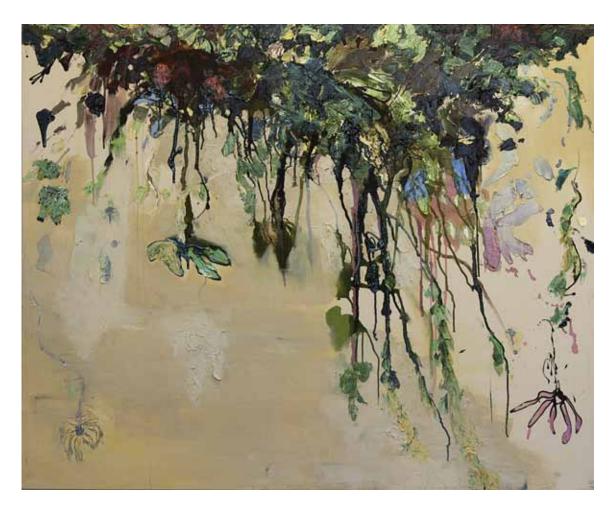


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Living Paint (Detail)



Installation In-Progress (2015)



**Dripping Plant**66.5 x 53.5 inches
Acrylic on Canvas, 2013



Ooze II
36 x48 inches
Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2013



Plant Monster II
36 x 60 inches
Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas, 2013

### About the Curator

Katherine French is Director Emerita of Danforth Art, where she curated numerous exhibitions exploring historical and contemporary expressionism. Recipient of an award for curatorial excellence from the International Association of Art Critics, she was also named Best Curator of Locally Made Art at the Boston Art Awards. Under her direction, Danforth Art was designated an Outstanding Cultural Organization by the Massachusetts Arts Education Collaborative.

## About the Walter Feldman Fellowship for Emerging Artists

This annual fellowship program supports the careers of artists through the experience of a solo exhibition, curatorial support, and expert counsel in marketing and business skill. Inaugural shows in this program showcase work by artists working in all two-dimensional media except photography. This program is made possible with the investment of celebrated abstract expressionist artist Walter Feldman, who has long held the goal to support emerging artists with opportunities for professional recognition and growth. Sarah Meyers Brent is a 2015 recipient of this fellowship.

#### About the Artist

Brent has exhibited work in numerous venues and mounted her first major show, *Living Paint*, at the Hampden Gallery in Amherst, MA in 2014. Select group exhibitions include *Pretty Ugly* at the Cambridge Arts Association, Cambridge, MA, where she won the juror's choice award; Community of Artists at Danforth Art, Framingham, MA; *The Departed* at the Distillery Gallery, Boston, MA; *International Painting III* at Jeffrey Leder Gallery, Long Island City, NY; Brenda Taylor Gallery, New York, NY; and *Movement* at TEDx Somerville, Somerville, MA. Twice awarded residencies at the Vermont Studio Center, Brent is also recipient of an Artist Resource Trust Grant from the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, who designated her a *25 at 25 Fellow*. Brent's work appears in numerous private collections and in the Liquitex Corporate Collection.

Born in Hadley, NY, Sarah Meyers Brent received her BFA from Skidmore College, her Post-Baccalaureate in Studio Art from Brandeis University, and her MFA from the University of New Hampshire at Durham. The artist lives in Cambridge, MA and maintains a studio at the Joy Street Studios in Somerville, MA.

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## Acknowledgements

Sarah Meyers Brent is immensely grateful to Walter Feldman, painter and Professor Emeritus of Brown University, whose visionary support of young artists through the Walter Feldman Fellowship for Emerging Artists provided opportunities for professional growth at an integral time in an artists career. The range, emotion, and life experience shining through in his artworks have been an inspiration to Sarah.

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The artist would like to express deepest gratitude to friends and family, who have been encouraging in ways that inspire the confidence that allows her to paint. Special thanks goes to her family, including her parents Roy and Deborah, sister Yael, aunt Laura, the Brent family and cousins Andrea and Rebecca, who have started small collections of Sarah's work. Sarah would like to express gratitude to her husband Benjamin for his loving support and encouragement and to her children Abraham and Eli for their inspiration.