

SERPENTINE



CECILY BROWN

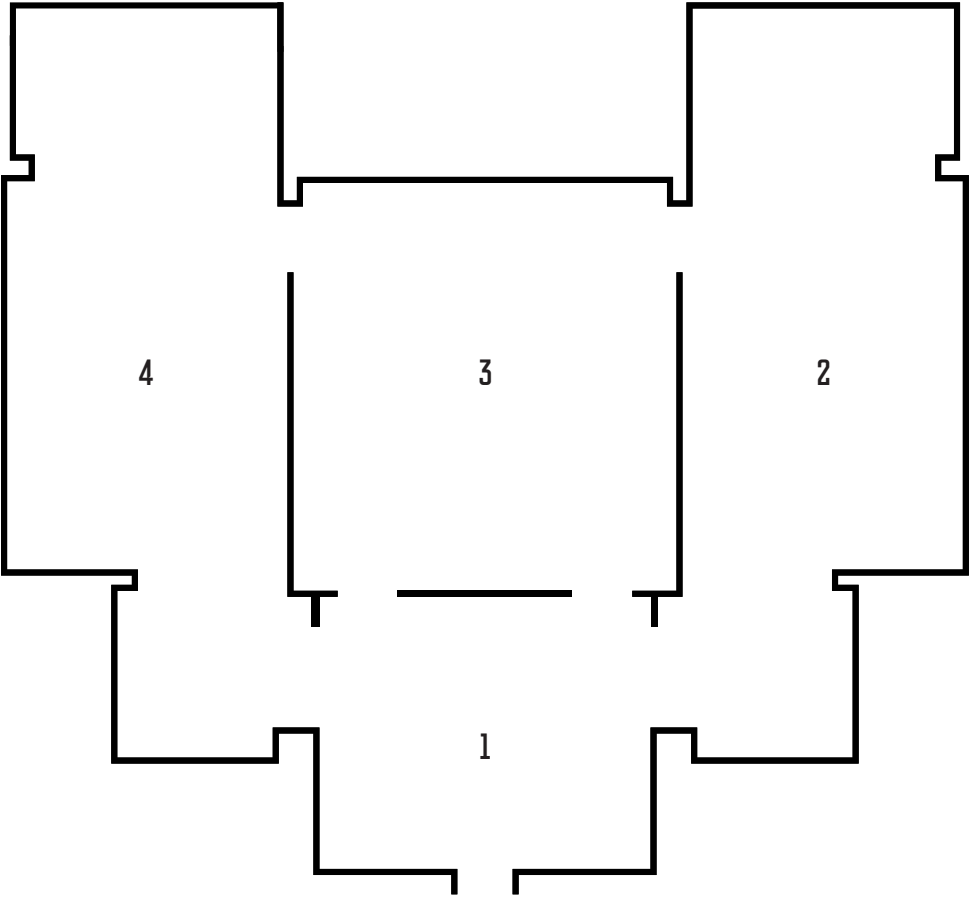
PICTURE MAKING

SERPENTINE SOUTH
27 MARCH – 6 SEPTEMBER 2026



A Round Robin, 2023–24

SERPENTINE SOUTH



INTRODUCTION

Paintings are always asking questions, and each painting asks its own set of questions. Every few moves you make, you've set up a whole set of new problems that you then have to answer. I want to leave that openness.

– Cecily Brown

Over three decades Cecily Brown has produced a dynamic body of painting characterised by vigorous brushstrokes, vivid colour and all-over compositions that draw viewers into a space of active looking. Working across multiple canvases and frequently shifting scale, Brown approaches painting as an intensely physical and intuitive process, led by the medium itself, in which traces of her movements animate the surfaces of her works.

Brown draws on a wide range of visual sources, from the acknowledged 'icons' of Western art history to children's book illustrations. She engages in a continual play of revealing and concealing her subject: figurative elements emerge, dissolve and re-form within dense fields of paint. The productive tension between image and mark, subject and process, sustains an ambiguity and openness to interpretation that is central to Brown's practice. As the artist has remarked, 'I don't have a message to get across, so the subject is always just painting and how to push painting. I'm thoroughly absorbed by that.'

Born in London and raised in suburban Surrey, Brown moved permanently to New York City in the mid-1990s. Early works featuring her signature ‘bunnies’ brought her international recognition, playfully reworking art-historical motifs while emphasising the visceral materiality of her medium. Since then, Brown has repeatedly returned to classical motifs – pastoral scenes, still lifes, shipwrecks and scenes of human drama – only to destabilise the confines of narrative clarity in favour of sensation, movement and painterly instability.

Picture Making brings together works inspired by Serpentine’s location in Kensington Gardens, a site with personal resonances for Brown. New and recent paintings revisit familiar subjects – amorous couples, woodland scenes and ‘nature walks’ – and are presented alongside key works dating back to 2001. Recent monotypes and drawings touch on Brown’s early memories of the English landscape and her interest in the darker undercurrents of nursery rhymes and cautionary tales. Together, these works trace the evolution, continuity and deepening complexity of Brown’s approach to painting over the past twenty-five years.

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From top to bottom:

Nature Walk with red yellow blue, 2024

Nature Walk in Black and White, 2024

1.

A jigsaw-puzzle illustration inspired this series of ‘nature walk’ paintings, providing a framework for infinite variation. Brown often borrows from existing imagery, drawing on a wide range of references, from art-historical ‘quotes’ to album covers, news photographs and fleeting images seen on television. As she notes, ‘I look at *everything*, and everything finds a way into the work.’

Brown introduced pastoral and garden-like settings into her work in the early 2000s, inspired in part by eighteenth-century painters such as Francisco Goya. Since then, the natural world, and the entanglement of human and organic forms, have remained central to her work. The urban park, suspended between cultivation and wildness, serves as a stage for social theatre and offers a particularly rich setting for her formal explorations. These designed yet unpredictable environments act as subject matter and metaphor, echoing the tension in her practice between structure and spontaneity, image and abstract mark.

Anything is possible in a painting. It’s a kind of artificial, fantasy realm constructed by the artist. For me, the nature paintings are a site to work on memory. And the way I approach that is to invoke that feeling of trying to grasp what something is – the experience of trying to remember something. I want it to be the same feeling as when a word is on the tip of your tongue, but you can’t quite remember it.

– Cecily Brown

2.

Since the late 1990s, sexual encounters have been a central subject in Brown's work, found in paintings of coupling figures and frenzied, all-over compositions in which writhing body parts emerge from abstract brushwork. Embracing oil paint's capacity to evoke flesh, she explores the unspoken drives that shape human behaviour.

In *Picture Making*, the park becomes the setting for amorous encounters. As Brown explains, 'I love the idea of the very romantic river or lake. And the follies – so many people must have fooled around in them.' She collapses the borders between body and landscape, merging entwined figures with their surroundings. The paintings' energetic brushwork and textured surfaces carry an erotic charge that echoes the tactile intimacy of a couple's embrace.



Couple, 2003–04

Brown first became interested in shipwreck paintings in 2016. She was inspired by Théodore Géricault's infamous painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19), which depicts the horrifying aftermath of the wreck of a French naval ship. In paintings such as *The last shipwreck* (2018) fragmented, fleshy forms rise to the surface of the composition amid rolling waves before sinking back into dense layers of paint. Brown reimagines the shipwreck theme in a park context in recent paintings of reclining couples in boats. As she explains, 'Certain subjects never really go away in my work. They stay in the lexicon... It's all a cycle... [and] with each new cycle, you're coming at it from a different angle.'

I've realised that if I start with someone else's image, it's a way to stop everything becoming abstract too quickly, because a lot of the time I'm just struggling to pull a figure back in.

– Cecily Brown



The last shipwreck, 2018

3.

Brown often works on several canvases at once, shifting in scale between the monumental and the diminutive. Her large paintings demand an intensely physical process, their surfaces bearing the traces of her movement, with sweeping, gestural brushstrokes clearly visible. This scale allows her to build complex, all-over compositions in which marks accumulate into dense visual fields, inviting a slow, embodied way of looking.

By contrast, the smaller works, often made flat or while seated, evolve slowly and become more intricately worked, their gestures compressed and deliberate. Across these varying formats, Brown explores the oscillation between the recognisable and the abstract – the sense of an image coming into being – to hold the viewer in a continuous present tense. Together, these works reveal her close attention to how the dimensions of a surface, and her bodily relationship to it, shape the choreography of paint.

Sometimes you, as the artist, don't know what you're doing. And often that's the most exciting part, when the artist is basically figuring it out in real time... I always thought if I knew what I was going to paint, what would be the point of executing it?

– Cecily Brown



The Fiddlehead, 2025

4.

The titles of Brown's works are as elusive as they are evocative. They often arise from personal connections to the diverse cultural references that inform the artist's practice – from Hollywood musicals to half-remembered popular idioms, literature and art history. The titles are primarily used as a means of identifying paintings rather than descriptive tools for interpreting a work.

Study for Sarn Mere 3 (2008) references the fictional lake that serves as the brooding setting for Mary Webb's 1924 novel *Precious Bane*. In the novel, the atmospheric environment is the backdrop against which the lives of the unfortunate characters play out. Although the painting is neither a preparatory study nor a direct depiction of Webb's lake, the title nevertheless points to literature as an important touchstone for Brown.



Study for Sarn Mere 3, 2008



Untitled (from Three Kittens in a Boat), 2024

Drawing is a daily practice for Brown. She often begins by making copies of other people's artworks, explaining, 'I feel I don't really understand something visually until I've copied it... then I can use it – it becomes fully part of my vocabulary.'

This selection of drawings highlights her interest in children's book illustrations, many of which feature animal characters in countryside or park settings. Since her bunny paintings of the 1990s, Brown has used animals as proxies to explore the darker side of human nature – a subject that also draws her to the cautionary animal tales of Beatrix Potter. Referring to *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* (1908), in which a fox tricks a duck into coming for dinner, she says, 'It's cute and it's horror, like nature. Beautiful but horrific... if you have a garden, you know it's a battlefield out there.' Brown's interest in this duality is found in the tension between the bucolic and more sinister elements of park life that runs throughout the exhibition.

When I was first exposed to art, I thought of it as something that could contain scary content, that could almost be horror. I'm increasingly realising the way in which art helps you look at something that you wouldn't want to look at in real life. It's showing you this world that helps you to understand the world itself, which is too overwhelming and too brutal. It's a sort of in-between, surrogate world.

– Cecily Brown

*If I'm struggling with something in the studio,
I sometimes make prints for a week, and that can really
help me get unstuck because it's so loose and free. It's
very unprecious. The monotypes, in particular, are like
peeling away layers of a painting.*

– Cecily Brown



Untitled (the 5 senses), 2024

LIST OF WORKS

Paintings and monotypes

Unless otherwise stated, all works are Private Collection.

Measurements: height x width

Bacchanal, 2001

Oil on linen

121.9 x 152.4 cm

The Baptism, 2015

Oil on linen

246.4 x 226.1 cm

Birds are not real, 2024

Oil on linen

43.2 x 73.7 cm

Birds are not real, 2024–25

Oil on linen

78.7 x 134.6 cm

A Bitter Moon, 2021–25

Oil on linen

134.6 x 170.2 cm

Canopy, 2004

Oil on linen

203.2 x 203.2 cm

The charmed water, 2024

Oil on linen

119.4 x 149.9 cm

Couple, 2003–04

Oil on linen

228.6 x 203.2 cm

FAMM (Female Artists of the Mougins Museum), France – The Levett Collection

A deer, a clearing, a starting, 2024

Oil on linen

48.3 x 78.7 cm

The Fiddlehead, 2025

Oil on linen

33 x 48.3 cm

Froggy would a-wooing go, 2024–25

Oil on linen

182.9 x 180.3 cm

A Green and Pleasant Picture, 2024

Oil on linen

33 x 48.3 cm

Hunt, 2019

Monotype with watercolour and watercolour crayon on Lanaquarelle paper
118.8 x 169.6 cm

Private collection, courtesy of Two Palms, New York

Hurry Up Please Its Time, 2025

Oil on linen

149.9 x 170.2 cm

The last shipwreck, 2018

Oil on linen

210.8 x 200.7 cm

Private collection, London

Little Miss Muffet, 2024–25

Oil on linen

180.3 x 182.9 cm

Nature Walk in Black and White, 2024

Oil on linen

104.1 x 170.2 cm

Nature Walk with Cat and Heron, 2024

Oil on linen

58.4 x 73.7 cm

Nature Walk with deer and duck, 2024

Oil and linen

73.7 x 109.2 cm

Nature Walk with Hysterical Sky, 2024–25

Oil on linen

33 x 43.2 cm

Nature Walk with Nymphs, 2024

Oil on linen

109.2 x 149.9 cm

Nature Walk with Paranoia, 2024

Oil on linen

226.1 x 210.8 cm

Nature Walk with red yellow blue, 2024

Oil on linen

104.1 x 154.9 cm

New Girl on a Swing, 2025

Oil on linen

109.2 x 104.1 cm

Players and painted stage, 2024

Oil on linen

33 x 43.2 cm

A Round Robin, 2023–24

Oil on linen

226.1 x 261.6 cm

The Serpentine Picture, 2024

Oil on linen

119.4 x 185.4 cm

Sick Mood at Sunset, 2016–17

Oil on linen

261.6 x 246.4 cm

De Ying Foundation

The Sky Suspended, 2024

Oil on linen, in 3 parts

Overall: 210.8 x 403.9 cm

Study for Sarn Mere 3, 2008

Oil on linen

215.9 x 226.1 cm

Private Collection, Switzerland

Terry and Julie, 2025

Oil on linen

154.9 x 149.9 cm

*Trees, a lake, a log cabin, a waterfall,
a deer and a sunset*, 2024

Oil on linen

226.1 x 210.8 cm

Untitled, 2024

Monotype in watercolour crayon on
Lanaquarelle paper

101 x 75.6 cm

Untitled (after Kathleen Hale), 2024

Monotype in watercolour crayon on
Lanaquarelle paper

76.2 x 101 cm

Drawings

Numbers correspond to works in the display case.

Untitled (Boating), 2021–23
Oil on UV-curable pigment on linen
78.7 x 73.7 cm

Untitled (Boating), 2021–25
Oil on linen
78.7 x 73.7 cm

Untitled (the 5 senses), 2024
Monotype in watercolour crayon on
Lanaquarelle paper
101 x 76.2 cm

1. *The Serpentine Gallery*, 2024
Watercolour and ink on paper
22.9 x 30.5 cm
2. *Untitled (from The Colour Kittens)*, 2024
Gouache, watercolour and ink
on paper
40.6 x 30.5 cm
3. *Untitled (from Joe Sutphin)*, 2023
Coloured pencil on paper
25.4 x 17.8 cm
4. *Untitled (from Ladybird)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
31.1 x 40.6 cm
5. *Untitled (from Ladybird)*, 2024
Pencil and watercolour on paper
31.1 x 40.6 cm
6. *Untitled (from Ladybird)*, 2024
Watercolour on paper
31.1 x 40.6 cm
7. *Untitled (from Ladybird)*, 2024
Gouache and watercolour on paper
35.6 x 52.1 cm
8. *Untitled (from Ladybird)*, 2024
Gouache, watercolour and ink
on paper
45.7 x 61 cm

9. *Untitled (from Magritte)*, 2023
Coloured pencil on paper
25.4 x 17.8 cm
10. *Untitled (from Orlando)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
22.9 x 30.5 cm
11. *Untitled (from Orlando)*, 2024
Gouache and watercolour on paper
30.5 x 40.6 cm
12. *Untitled (from Orlando)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
45.7 x 61 cm
13. *Untitled (from Rev. George Liddell Johnston)*, 2023
Ink and watercolour on paper
35.6 x 50.8 cm
14. *Untitled (from Richard Doyle)*, 2023
Ink and watercolour on paper
22.9 x 30.5 cm
15. *Untitled (from Three Kittens in a Boat)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
22.9 x 30.5 cm
16. *Untitled (from Three Kittens in a Boat)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
26 x 35.6 cm
17. *Untitled (from Three Kittens in a Boat)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
26 x 35.6 cm
18. *Untitled (from Three Kittens in a Boat)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
26 x 35.6 cm
19. *Untitled (from Three Kittens in a Boat)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
31.1 x 40.6 cm
20. *Untitled (from Three Kittens in a Boat)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
31.1 x 40.6 cm
21. *Untitled (from Three Kittens in a Boat)*, 2024
Ink and watercolour on paper
35.6 x 50.8 cm
22. *Untitled (from Two Bad Mice)*, 2023
Ink and watercolour on paper
30.5 x 40.7 cm
23. *Untitled (from Two Bad Mice)*, 2023
Ink and watercolour on paper
35.6 x 50.8 cm

CECILY BROWN

Born in London in 1969 and raised in suburban Surrey, Cecily Brown attended the Slade School of Fine Art, London. She graduated with a BFA in painting in 1993 and moved to New York the following year, where she continues to live and work.

Recent solo exhibitions of the artist's work have taken place at The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA (2025); Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX (2024); Museo Novecento, Florence, Italy (2023); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY (2023); Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Germany (2022); Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy (2022); Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, England (2020); and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark (2018).

SATURDAY TALKS

23 May 2026, 12pm

Kit Gurnos, Assistant Exhibitions Curator, leads a tour of *Cecily Brown: Picture Making*

4 July 2026, 12pm

Lizzie Carey-Thomas, Director of Programmes and Chief Curator, leads a tour of *Cecily Brown: Picture Making*

BSL Interpretation is available on request for all our Saturday Talks.



Terry and Julie, 2025

EXHIBITION CREDITS

Cecily Brown: Picture Making is curated by Lizzie Carey-Thomas, Director of Programmes and Chief Curator; with Kit Gurnos, Assistant Exhibitions Curator

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A fully-illustrated catalogue, published by Serpentine and Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Köln, is available to purchase in the gallery shop and online.

Serpentine has released two original print editions to coincide with the exhibition: a giclée print and a large-format etching and silkscreen in a small edition size. Find out more online at **shop.serpentinegalleries.org/collections/limited-edition**

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Discover more about *Cecily Brown: Picture Making* in our free digital guide on Bloomberg Connects

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The Serpentine Picture, 2024