

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

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**Angel (detail)**  
by Greg Eason



# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

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## ARDEN BENDLER BROWNING

### *Exuberant Chaos*

BY KENNETH J. PROCTER



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**A**rden Bendler Browning works in Philadelphia, an old city that is sprouting green in its cracks. Green also plays a big role in the artist's drawings. "There is a lot of green in my work because of the abundance of empty, overgrown lots and the fact that Google Maps, one of my resources, uses photos of Philadelphia that are taken during the summer," Browning says. "I've always been interested in the way that nature—manufactured or organic—pushes through the artificial, constructed environment, particularly in cramped urban spaces."

For Browning, drawing is a respite from the expansive scale and time of painting. Whole neighborhoods sprawl and intertwine across her mural-scale canvases, but her drawings are small. "I think of them as addressing time quite differently from the paintings because of the differences in layering," she explains. "The paintings are like longer videos compressed into one compacted image, whereas the drawings are more like snapshots, or a shorter period of time condensed into one image. Sometimes I look at Google Maps' street views of paths I've taken through the city—and then jump ahead down blocks I've never physically explored."

## Empty

2010, Flashe and acrylic gouache on rag paper, 10 x 10. Collection The Center for Emerging Visual Artists, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Browning paints her drawings. Up close—the small scale draws you in—the experience is freewheeling, rhythmic, abstract, and



TOP

## Under and Around

2010, acrylic gouache and Flashe on rag paper, 11½ x 14. Courtesy the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

physical. Her colors have the clean, flat brightness that comes from gouache; black for contrast; and plenty of untouched paper, a hallmark of traditional drawing. On this scale, you feel every flick of the artist's brush and line of scumbled crayon, but there is not a speck or line too much.

Browning layers paint and crayon over paint and crayon. Layers build the complexity of the image, the structure,



ABOVE

## Disappear

2009, Flashe, acrylic gouache, and water-soluble crayon on rag paper, 15 x 22. Private collection.

the odd bits and the lush obstructions. Everything angles. Verticals lean dynamically out of plumb. Straight lines swell, slim, and meander. Browning's forms and process create analogs for the city.

The city is cramped, and Browning's drawings are packed, but they also have plenty of space—space for the colors to breathe and the illusion of space that the artist creates with references to

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY



walkways, streets, and buildings. Many of her compositions begin with photographs. Cameras create pictures in perspective, but that's just where Browning starts.

*Under and Around* typifies the complexity of Browning's space. Lines angle in from the baseline, lay a ground plane across the paper, dodge a pillar,

duck under a bridge, explode into patterns over the central vanishing point, then veer off the page as the city aims right. The composition swirls and radiates around the pillar the way cities eddy out from their core. The route through Browning's Philly is at crazy angles, the way cities grow up all odds and angles out of sight of the downtown grid.

Although many of Browning's drawings similarly plunge into space, *Under* stacks up a pile of patterns—roads and bricks, bits and pieces, trees fenced in the way cities keep their trees. Black winter branches, bare down to their lines, snarl and tangle with the sky. Cities don't offer much sky, so be grateful for a few

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY



ABOVE  
**Under**

2009, acrylic gouache and water-soluble crayon on rag paper, 15 x 22. Courtesy the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

blue shreds. *Disappear*, a favorite of the artist “because of the ambiguity of the buried shapes,” flows and tumbles down the page. “Part of a house peers through vegetation, and a blue tarplike surface covers something that is unknown,” she says. “To me, it is emblematic of the beauty I often see in neglected, transitory spaces all around my neighborhood.”

Clean white paper looks empty, but black has presence right from the start and adds its mysterious darkness. *Blocked* is among a group of drawings done on black paper. According to Browning, “I like that the focus is on an undecipherable collection of things—garbage, plant life, distant buildings, shadows—and that the negative space allows one to imagine structures in those spaces.” The darker palette

and chain-link fence could make this a *noir* scene, but the spill of unkempt colors is exuberant. Browning describes her color as artificial, “a result of the distortion inherent in the representations of places through Google Maps, and the commercial colors of bad paint jobs on old buildings and advertisements.”

Philly is dilapidated and overgrown, but in Browning’s hand its chaos is dynamic—bright and alive. Consider her drawing *Empty*. Neither sad nor sweet, it is a riot of color. The greens are clean. The blues are as fair as a clear summer sky. The pink surprise puts a smile on your face. ❖

BELOW

**Blocked**

2010, Flashe and acrylic gouache on rag paper, 11½ x 14. Collection Leslie Mutchler and Jason Urban.

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