

THE JAMES AND ALEXANDRA BROWN ESTATE

James Brown (1951–2020): An Artistic Legacy of Cultural Synthesis and Imagination

James Brown, an influential figure in contemporary art, was born on September 11, 1951, in Los Angeles, California. Over his lifetime, Brown developed a profound artistic practice that married primitive influences with modernist abstraction, delving into themes of mythology, ritual, and spirituality. Alongside his wife, Alexandra Condon, and their three children, Degenhart, Cosmas and Dagmar, he forged an artistic and familial life rooted in European and Mexican cultures, with a particular reverence for Oaxacan traditions. His journey led him from the experimental art scene of New York's East Village to a deep engagement with Mexican artisan communities, culminating in an artistic legacy that endures globally.

Brown's work is characterized by collections of images and objects that coexist in specific contexts, forming constellations of ambiguous elements in apparent motion. These elements often resemble undefined, almost floating organisms, interconnected and related to one another. Brown's art emphasizes the spaces between forms, both within individual pieces and across his body of work, to communicate the interdependence of all things, diversity, and unpredictability. He transformed elements from the natural world into the realm of art, creating visual rhythms balanced between forms with precise and organic distribution. Opposing the perceptual limitations of contemporary life's alienation, Brown utilized a wide range of supports, disciplines, and materials. He intentionally incorporated unfinished processes into his pieces, highlighting the ever-changing nature of life and the cosmos.

Early Life and Education

Brown's initial years were steeped in a curiosity for diverse artistic and spiritual traditions. His formal education began at Immaculate Heart College in Hollywood, where he was introduced to the power of symbols, myths, and cultural storytelling in art. He continued his studies at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he absorbed Renaissance and medieval art influences, especially Italian

works. This foundation equipped him with a unique blend of artistic influences that he would later fuse with modernist and tribal elements, establishing a style that balanced the ancient and the avant-garde.

The 1980s New York Art Scene: Neo-Expressionism and Breakthrough

Brown's career took a pivotal turn when he joined the dynamic New York art scene of the 1980s, becoming an essential figure within the East Village. His work resonated with neo-expressionism, a movement characterized by intense, gestural forms and layered textures. He found himself alongside contemporaries such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Julian Schnabel, and David Salle, Kenny Scharf and Francesco Clemente all of whom were redefining expressionist art. Brown's pieces stood apart for their unique synthesis of earthy tones, rough textures, and tribal influences, evoking a connection to both primal energies and sophisticated abstraction.

Brown's exhibitions during this period placed him at the forefront of contemporary American art:

- **1983: *Champions***, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York – This group show featured Brown with Basquiat, Haring, and other icons, marking his emergence within the East Village art scene.
- **1983: *Solo Exhibition***, Nature Morte, New York – Brown's first solo show in New York, establishing his raw, expressive style.
- **1985: *Solo Exhibition***, Bruno Bischofberger Gallery, Zurich – This exhibition expanded his audience internationally, highlighting his symbolic, textured compositions.
- **1986: *Solo Exhibition***, Leo Castelli Gallery, New York – A hallmark exhibition solidifying his reputation in the American modernist landscape.

Through these shows, Brown's work received critical acclaim, praised for its mix of ancient motifs, tribal references, and expressive abstraction, as he integrated traditional storytelling within a modern framework.

The Oaxaca Chapter: A Life and Art of Cultural Immersion

In the early 1990s, James and Alexandra relocated with their three children to the Oaxaca Valley in Mexico, a move that profoundly influenced his work and philosophy. Embracing Oaxaca's rich indigenous culture, Brown became not just an artist but an active participant in the local community. Collaborating with Mexican artisans, he engaged in projects that celebrated traditional crafts, most notably in textile arts.

Carpe Diem Press: Founded by Alexandra in 2020, Carpe Diem Press is renowned for producing limited-edition artist books that blend contemporary art with traditional Mexican craftsmanship. Collaborating with Gabriel and Judith Quintas of Linotípográfica Quintas in Oaxaca, the Browns created books featuring works by influential artists from the United States and Mexico, including Joan Jonas, Graciela Iturbide, Kiki Smith, and Francisco Toledo, Dr Larkra, Dan McCleary and Jack Pierson. These collaborations often incorporated original prints made by the artists, enhancing the uniqueness of each edition.

In January 2020, the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca (IAGO) hosted the exhibition "Imagen y palabra, Carpe Diem 2000 2020; La Editorial de Alexandra & James Brown en Oaxaca." This exhibition celebrated two decades of Carpe Diem Press. The showcase provided an intimate look into the process of creating artist books, all produced in Oaxaca. It featured vitrines displaying artist books, archives, proofs, photographs, and rare materials, offering insights into the Browns' collaborative efforts with various artists.

The exhibition at IAGO not only highlighted the artistic achievements of Carpe Diem Press but also underscored the Browns' dedication to fostering cultural dialogue and preserving the art of bookmaking in Oaxaca. Their work stands as a testament to the harmonious blend of contemporary art and traditional craftsmanship, leaving a lasting impact on the artistic community in Oaxaca and beyond.

Rug-Making: Brown collaborated with indigenous artisans such as the Hernandez family in Teotitlán del Valle to create handwoven rugs using large wooden looms in traditional Zapotec style. These works blended his modernist vision with ancestral

techniques, underscoring his commitment to preserving and uplifting indigenous crafts. Through the Carpe Diem Press initiative and with the guidance of his brother Matthew Brown, James and Alexandra invited such artists to create designs and motifs that would be woven in Teotitlán de Valle. The collection now includes over 100 bespoke artist rugs.

Shell Necklaces: Through out his life James collected shells from the Californian coast to the shores of the Mediterranean sea. He used these shells to make extravagant necklaces that Alexandra wore in abundance, that he gifted to friends and that hung on the bare walls of his studios.

This period also saw the creation of one of Brown's most personal series, *My Other House*. Inspired by his sons' discovery of a hidden mezzanine in their Oaxaca home, this series became a metaphor for the imaginative space essential to artistic life. The works depict gardens, neighbors, and family scenes, providing a window into his life in Mexico.

Later Exhibitions and Legacy

Brown's works have been showcased in some of the world's most prestigious institutions, reflecting his wide-reaching influence:

- **2001:** *James Brown: Graphic Works*, Pace Prints, New York.
- **2005:** *James Brown: 10 Years in Oaxaca*, Ex-Escuela Quintana Roo, Mérida, Mexico.
- **2011:** *James Brown: The Realm of Chaos and Light (Part Two)* at Galerie Karsten Greve, Paris.
- **2014:** *James Brown: Solo Exhibition*, Livingstone Gallery, The Hague, Netherlands.
- **2017:** *James Brown: Oval*, Galerie Karsten Greve, Paris.
- **2017:** *James and Brown: Life and Work in Mexico*, USC Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles

- **2019:** *James Brown: Collages, Monotypes and Prints (1986–1992)* Galerie Lelong & Co.
- **2020:** *Imagen y palabra, Carpe Diem 2000–2020; La Editorial de Alexandra & James Brown en Oaxaca*, Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca (IAGO), Oaxaca.

Brown's work is housed in several esteemed museum collections worldwide, including:

- **Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York**
- **Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York** With notable works like *St. Bartolomeo II* (1983)
- **Whitney Museum of American Art, New York**
- **Centre Pompidou, Paris**
- **Kolumba Museum, Cologne**

Bibliography

James Brown's artistic journey is well-documented through books and catalogs that provide insight into his diverse phases. To name a few:

"James Brown: Impressions 1986/1999" (2000) A comprehensive catalogue raisonné published by Franck Bordas.

"James Brown: Recent Paintings" (1995) A mid-career reflection published by Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac.

"James Brown: The Notebooks" (1994) Featuring his notebooks, this work reveals his creative mind.

"James Brown: My Other House" (2011) Published with Museo Diego Rivera-Anahuacalli, focusing on his Oaxacan-inspired series.

"James Brown: The Sacred and the Profane" (1997) A look at the dualities in his work, published by Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac.

Through Carpe Diem Press, Brown also co-produced limited-edition books with artists such as Graciela Iturbide, emphasizing his commitment to multidisciplinary exploration.

Death and Enduring Legacy

In 2020, James and Alexandra Brown's lives were cut short by a tragic car accident in Mexico, a sudden and profound loss that reverberated throughout the art world. Tributes poured in from major art publications, including *Artforum*, *ArtNews*, and personal reflections from friends and colleagues. Articles like Trey Speegle's tribute on *treyspeegle.com* recalled James's artistic evolution and the life he and Alexandra had cultivated in Oaxaca, while David Ebony of *Artforum* celebrated Brown's accomplishments and collaborations as a testament to his boundary-crossing, multicultural approach to art. Andrew Russeth of *ArtNews* highlighted Brown's impact on the East Village scene and the trajectory that led him to Oaxaca, where he immersed himself in a culture that enriched both his personal and artistic life.

Continuing the Vision: Dagmar Brown and the Vision for James Brown's Work

Today, James Brown's legacy endures through the dedicated work of his daughter, Dagmar Brown. As the Executive Director of the James and Alexandra Brown estate, Dagmar is committed to preserving and advancing her father's contributions to contemporary art. She works not only to preserve his legacy but also to bring visibility to the lesser-known aspects of his career, especially those works and projects that arose from his life in Oaxaca. Under her stewardship, James Brown's art is not only maintained but is presented to new generations, allowing his oeuvre to resonate with modern audiences in ways that are both fresh and relevant.

Dagmar's approach to her father's legacy is multifaceted. She has expanded the visibility of Brown's later works, especially the *My Other House* series, by curating exhibitions and exploring digital platforms that make these works more accessible. She also oversees the legacy of Carpe Diem Press, collaborating with contemporary artists and institutions to continue its mission of cross-cultural exchange and artistic exploration. Dagmar's role as the custodian of the James Brown estate reflects a commitment to honoring her father's legacy through an evolving lens, bringing forward new interpretations and honoring the integrity of his artistic vision. By shedding light on previously unexplored aspects of his work, Dagmar keeps James Brown's spirit alive in the art world, creating a bridge between his visionary practice and a world eager to engage with the depth and complexity of his life and work. Through her dedication, James Brown's influence remains an enduring presence, continually enriched and redefined for future audiences.