

Uncommon Woman: A Close Look at the Life and Art of Fanny Brennan



Sandy Lane

Never having heard of Fanny Brennan, a painter who died earlier this year, is a regrettable but too-common malady. The first of the contradictions inherent in the life and work of this extraordinary woman is that she was almost too talented to make a name for herself outside of a wide and affectionate circle of friends. “Her paintings have always sold completely through,” Eric Larsen of Salander-O’Reilly Galleries told me. “Even exhibitions of forty works would be sold well before the shows came down. An unfortunate side-effect of her talent and supporters is that with all the work constantly sold there was little with which to attract new admirers.”

But in Brennan’s case a little was more than sufficient. One glimpse is generally enough to hook anyone. I’ve brought non-art lovers to their knees merely by opening the book *Skyshades*, a tiny volume reproducing sixty of her paintings at actual size, and asking them to glance at just one or two of the pictures. No one who opens the book can close it without looking at every page.

What is it about Brennan’s work that is so captivating?

Its size, certainly. None of her paintings is larger than two or three inches on any side. There is something daring as well as appealing about this insistence on the

small, and indeed it was almost an act of defiance when Brennan began studying art. “At the *Atelier Art et Jeunesse*,” she said several decades after the fact, “they were always trying to get me to fill the *entire* page of drawing paper. I only wanted to make very small pictures.”

Small, yes, but not little. She detested the term, and disliked her works being



Lighthouse

referred to as miniatures. And rightly so. In *The Techniques of Painting Miniatures*, Sue Burton stresses that size is not the most important factor in defining what is and isn’t a true miniature. “A painting that is tiny, but that would not stand the test of being enlarged...is not acceptable,” she insists. Brennan’s work, or at least the magic of it, would certainly be destroyed by any attempt to bring it to “normal” size.

Why work so small? Brennan herself didn’t much care to analyze that. “Some people can’t understand why I paint small,” she said in one interview. “It may have something to do with my eyesight, I don’t know.” (Brennan was nearsighted.) “But,” she finished firmly, “I am comfort-

able doing small paintings.”

Nor did she show much interest in examining the occasionally startling, always delightful content of her own paintings. Referring to one in particular, a pink pearl descending onto a thumbtack, she said simply, “It flew into my head, I put it down, it looked right, and there it is.”

So it is. Her son Richard stressed to me in our conversations the intuitive nature of Brennan’s work. She did not search out material, did nothing that might be considered research for her art. Ideas simply came to her and she ran with them. It isn’t strictly true, as Calvin Tomkins stated in his introduction to *Skyshades*, that ideas other people offered never worked.

Her son, who worked closely with her in sounding board and moral support capacities, gave her objects that appear in her paintings, such as a pair of calipers. An architect, he also came up with the idea for the delightful pair of paintings *Day Room* and *Night Room* (In *Skyshades*), from which *Day/ Night Room* followed naturally.

Inspiration also came from pictures in magazines — *National Geographic*, *House and Garden*, travel journals, whatever came her way. Brennan especially enjoyed, and made use of, landscapes, seascapes, and skyscapes; but anything that caught her fancy, even an advertisement, she clipped and saved for later use.



Bubble

(Richard Brennan said that she had “files full of places.”) She usually painted from photographs; even the delightful “found objects” that turn up so often in her paintings would sometimes be photographed, if she needed a particular effect of suspension or light for the picture. Often, though, she would paint those from life, at the glass-topped Parsons desk in her bedroom that was her “studio.” She worked in oil on pre cut gessoed panels, of which she kept a large supply in various sizes so she could choose one to suit the painting she had in mind. Generally Brennan had four or five pictures going at a time — she could work on one picture while letting a layer of paint dry on another, and the change kept her from getting bored.

Having painted the setting, she would insert the object that would raise the piece from standard, if lovely, scenery to place of enchantment. A snail shell painted at actual size appears gigantic when viewed in the middle of a tiny *Irish Landscape*; similarly, an innocent white button, which in its mortal life probably spent its time modestly closing a man’s shirt, holds its own proudly and enigmatically amidst the blue sky and gray-touched clouds of *Sky Button*.

Here is Brennan’s magic. There are oceans, trees, and skies in her art: very well. There are spools of thread, lengths of ribbon, pins, and pearls: just so. None of these presented alone evokes a thrill — they’re too familiar. But it is just this familiarity that zaps the viewer on seeing the juxtapositions Brennan works, which are unexpected and yet somehow natural. There is an unconsciousness about the almost-animate objects in her paintings — the needle basting the ocean to the shore, the whisk beating clouds into a fluffy froth — that makes the viewer feel as if he’s stumbled into a new land and caught the

inhabitants obliviously going about their usual business. “Simple, pleasurable art,” Richard Brennan called it.

He also mentioned that his mother ran into difficulty with perspective and vanishing points, which would matter a great deal in works of a more conventional size and subject matter. In the works Brennan chose to do, she was freer to just paint what she wished to without having to struggle too rigorously with the more technical aspects of her craft. Not that she could ever have been described as lazy, in either her professional or personal life. But Brennan was one of the few genuinely gifted artists who could do what she did purely for the pleasure of it and still turn out work worth having. She painted what she loved — aside from people. The viewer will search in vain for any human presence in Brennan’s work. And yet she was the most sociable of women. Speak to anyone lucky enough to have known her and the words “friends” and “friendship” will undoubtedly crop up. She was constantly cooking and caring for those in her wide circle. And so the sense of stillness and solitude in her paintings is doubly striking.

One has no choice about artistic temperament — you have it or you don’t. But artists do make choices about their work. “She wanted her paintings to be stimulating without being threatening,” Richard

Small, yes, but not little.
She detested the term,
and disliked her works
being referred to as
miniatures.

Brennan told me. “She edited out the macabre.” Which means that she wasn’t unaware of the dark side of life; she only thought it had no place in her art. Even her darkest, mistiest landscapes never approach being somber. In the direction of seriousness, thoughtful is as far as Brennan’s work is willing to go. Art with any larger “moral” point, such as political painting, left her cold. She generally captures instead a sort of mischievous magic that draws her unique work closer to surrealism than to any other school — she’s been compared to Magritte, and did admire his work. “Surrealism cannot accurately be described as fantasy,” Sarane Alexandrian wrote in *Surrealist Art*, “but as a superior reality.” Which sounds like Brennan’s paintings, and also like her childhood.

Fanny Brennan was born in 1921 in Paris to American parents who were good friends with Gerald and Sara Murphy, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, and the like. Her mother and father were not so much artists as artistically inclined. Yet another



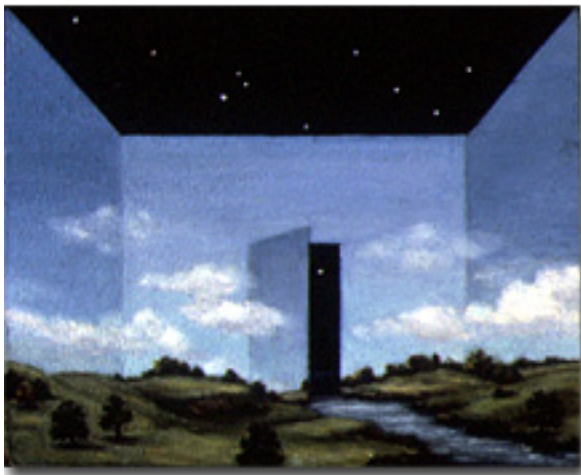
Books & Oranges

“She wanted her paintings to be stimulating without being threatening...”



Cascade

contradiction in her unique life was that, though her parents were never rich, Fanny lived a privileged life by virtue of where and when she was born. Paris in the twenties and thirties, especially to the Ameri-



Day Night Room

cans who settled there so pleasurably, was a place out of time, a golden age that was all too fleeting. “Those tragically ecstatic years,” Zelda Fitzgerald wrote to the Murphys in 1940 after the death of her husband, “when the pockets of the world were filled with pleasant surprises and people still thought of life in terms of their right to a good time are about to wane.” But Fanny Brennan got to be a child in their heyday.

“I cannot insist enough,” William Rubin stressed in his essay in the MOMA catalogue of the works of Gerald Murphy, “on the meaning of being in Paris then for a neophyte painter.” Fanny could be called that even as a child — she was included in her first group show when she was only twenty. Moving in the rarified circles she did would have meant one thing as an

adult. Being a child, and thus somewhat sheltered from the “tragic” side of “those ecstatic years,” she saw the extraordinary as everyday, and thanks to her own celebratory spirit, the everyday was often extraordinary.

But even her youth couldn’t keep her from seeing some of the darkness around her. Her best friend Honoria Donnelly (née Murphy) had two brothers, both of whom died at the age of sixteen. Their father Gerald Murphy, who spent a scant eight years of his life painting yet managed to produce such masterpieces as *Watch* and *Wasp and Pear*, was destroyed as an artist, living after the double tragedy “not by design but in response to events,” as Rubin aptly put it. Scottie Fitzgerald often visited while her parents lived their passionate, wildly unstable lives. Brennan was taken at a young age to see a show of Zelda Fitzgerald’s paintings. “It may have been 1934, or 1936, maybe,” she said much later. “They were extraordinary, and a little upsetting, actually. The only thing I remember about them are very large feet, and *huge* hands, and wonderfully drawn, they were sort of — rhythmic, but they were sort of deformed and depressing.”

It would be oversimplifying to the point of insulting to say that Brennan’s own work was a response to — a turning away from — the shadows haunting the artists nearest to her in her youth. But it is striking that a great part of her uneasiness with Zelda’s paintings was due to the “large” feet, the “*huge*” hands she perceived there. And several of the paintings of Gerald Murphy, who was practically a second

father to Brennan, were quite large (*Boat-deck* was eighteen feet high). Neither could these artists ever be accused of turning out consistently cheerful works — Murphy’s *Wasp and Pear*, though brilliant, is singularly uneasifying, and Zelda’s *Mad Tea Party* is the stuff of nightmares. It might be that Brennan saw what art could be — what it was to those artists nearest to home — and deliberately chose what it would be, instead, to her.

Though any such choice might not have been deliberate at all, but simply have flowed instead from her own generous, joyful spirit. The anecdotes from *her* days as a young artist in Paris are lively (she taught Picasso to play Chinese checkers, she rubbed peanut shells in Giacometti’s hair to see if they’d still be there the next day) and sometimes wickedly funny (she got kicked out of her boarding house for calling the concierge a cow). Back home in New York, she worked days, painted nights, and was included in a few group shows — a very promising start for a twenty-year-old artist. Ironically, this early success may have given her exactly the confidence needed to stop painting for over two decades. She was not like Gerald Murphy, who gave up his work in a sort of numb grief and had to turn his head whenever he passed an art museum. This unconventional woman followed the fairly conventional course of marrying, having children, and living very happily without the work that had once been of vital enough interest that she willingly burned quantities of midnight oil to pursue it.

Of course she had a great deal to occupy her. She had two sons, seven years apart. She and her husband, Hank Brennan, traveled a great deal. In “lean years,” she worked for various interior decorators; she also describes, in a brief autobiographical



Water Tight

The viewer will search in vain for any human presence in Brennan's work. And yet she was the most sociable of women.

sketch, small artistic endeavors such as covering little boxes in marbled paper and decorating them with old prints, some to sell and some to give to friends, and making small Christmas trees "that sold very well." But she didn't go back to painting until her eldest son was grown and her youngest settled in school, and then only at the urging of her husband and of Betty Parsons, who had first included Brennan's work in those early shows.

"Painting for her wasn't filled with angst," Eric Larson said simply, and looking at her work one can believe it. "It was something she could put down." Which is harder to believe. Anyone who could access such a lovely universe as that of Brennan's paintings must have been living a happy life indeed not to long to return to those tiny canvases.

But Brennan doesn't seem to have made any hard division between life and art. Her own life — serene, accomplished, joyful, and fun — was a work of art in itself. In her work one can see this easy, teasing give-and-take between work and fun, art and reality. Many of her pictures are paintings within paintings, where the canvas on the canvas reaches out to tickle the real world around it. In *Package*, a strand of yarn from a painting of several spools trails down to wrap a parcel, and the monotonous study of brown paper package on brown desk is relieved by the string, white in the "picture," staining into a brilliant red once it passes out of its frame. In some of

these "double" pictures, it's difficult to tell which is the "real" world and which the painting, as in *Double Tree*, where a picture of a tree is propped neatly on an easel next to the very tree it's portraying — except that the real tree, and all the landscape around it, is a dull, lifeless gray, while the picture is bright and colorful. Which is about as symbolic as Brennan's work ever got, and even that symbolism is open to question.

The meaning of Brennan's work may be simply: Look. Look at the paintings — take a moment away from a life which may sadly seem colorless and dreary — and enjoy them. See the wicked humor glinting from everyday objects. Take pleasure.

Brennan's work *is* pleasure, the giving and the taking of it. It is art which can not only be simply enjoyed, but which stands for enjoyment, plain and simple. You can carry around a book showing several dozen of her paintings, full-size, in a generous pocket. Or keep it at home, and slip into it at the end of a difficult day. You can't live in the world of Brennan's art anymore than you can live in Wonderland, more's the pity — but you can visit as often as you like. ~

Deborah Markus would like to thank Richard Brennan and Eric Larson for their generous, patient, assistance with this article.

Photos courtesy of Salander O'Reilly Galleries. All images © The Estate of Frances M. Brennan.