

Visual Art Review

# ‘Transformative Moves: Ray Brown’: Celebrating the life and work of esteemed Montpelier artist

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Ray Brown: "Primary Barn", Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

‘My paintings are stops on a journey, and they build on each other; they are not ends or beginnings, but the flow of my life,’ wrote the late beloved Montpelier artist Ray Brown, in an artist’s statement for a 2018 exhibition.

What a journey he had.

Brown, who died in March 2020 at age 79, created art almost every day of his adult life. Well known for his paintings — especially of barns and buildings of the Vermont landscape and recent abstracts inspired by Italian landscape and towns — he was also accomplished in drawing, printmaking, wood sculpture and ceramics.

In the journey of Brown’s remarkable six-decade creative career, a massive stroke did not stop him, but instead launched a new arc of artwork.

“Transformative Moves: Ray Brown,” an extensive exhibition presented by Barre’s Studio Place Arts, gives friends and fans of Brown an opportunity to be in his company again through his art — and again marvel at the spectacular breadth of his long career. For viewers new to Brown, the show offers a chance to see exciting and meaningful artwork and through it to get an introduction to this artist esteemed for his creativity and spirit.

This lifetime survey retrospective of paintings, prints and other works by Brown opened last week in downtown Barre. The show fills three galleries at SPA and walls of the café at AR Market and the Morse Block Deli. With more than 100 of Brown’s artworks, it spans six decades.



Ray Brown: “Five Villas”, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur



Ray Brown: "Flotsam #3", Jeb Wallace Brodeur

"Transformative Moves" accompanies "Rock Solid XXII," which is in SPA's Main Floor Gallery. Several of Brown's stone-related paintings, inspired by Barre quarries and Italian columns, also are in that exhibition.

The exhibition was curated by Mark Waskow, founder and president of Northern New England Museum of Contemporary Art. "This is a celebration of Ray's creative legacy, as well as an enduring testimony to his perseverance and adaptation in the face of life's challenges," says Waskow, a close friend and longtime admirer of Brown. "These works represent his triumphs over these travails and act as lasting documents to the strength of the human spirit."

NNEMoCA recently launched its Northern New England Artist Legacy Project, documenting lifetime work of culturally significant artists. This exhibition is the Legacy

Project's second endeavor, which included cataloguing more than 1,100 of Brown's artworks and assembling documentation of his life and career.

At "Transformative Moves," viewers can immerse themselves in the visual experience of Brown's work and may also read assorted research.

From tiny etchings in SPA's tiny Quick-Change Gallery, to a vibrant selection of Italy-inspired abstracts appropriately in AR Market, to works on paper at Morse Block Deli, each gallery has a well-conceived focus.



Ray Brown: "Untitled", Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

SPA's two upstairs galleries take viewers through decades of Brown's work. Brown often remarked that in his art education he wanted to learn to paint like Corot, but the emphasis in the early 1960s was on abstraction. That foundation shows in many of the earlier pieces in the Second Floor Gallery: geometric abstracts, his 1973 graphite "Homage to Masaccio #5," an abstracted nod to the Florentine Renaissance painter noted for his naturalism, and more.

Paintings reign in SPA's Third Floor Gallery, including vibrant abstracts inspired by landscapes. Brown's palette and shapes unmistakably communicate places of his inspiration — Vermont and Italy.

Born in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1940, Brown was inclined to sports and art in his youth. He nearly qualified for the 1960 U.S. Olympic hockey team. Art prevailed. He graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art with his BFA in 1963, starting his career in printmaking with George Lockwood's Impressions Printing in Boston.

Brown taught studio art and art history in Massachusetts. Along the way, he continued his own art education at Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1971 and 1972.

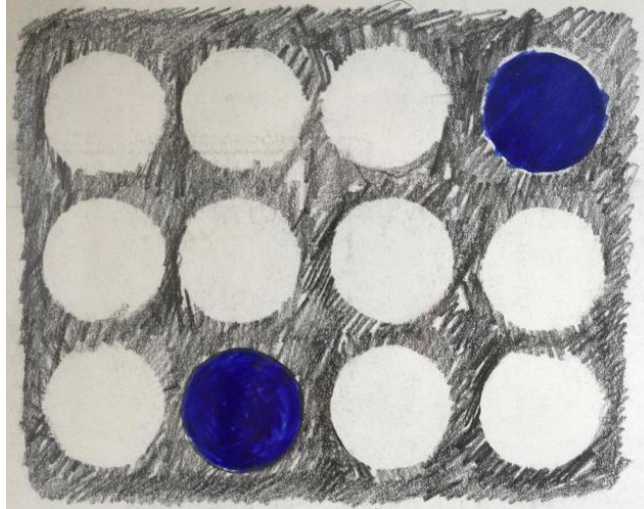
Brown and his wife, Jody Wilson Brown, relocated to Vermont in 1983, purchasing The Drawing Board art supply and framing business in Montpelier and building it as a hub of the central Vermont artist community.

Many people had their introduction to Brown through The Drawing Board's front window. Every day for years, a painting by Brown — often a barn or landscape — was the centerpiece of the Main Street window, a well-positioned spotlight illuminating it at night. The paintings changed often. As soon as one work sold, a new one graced the space.

In 2006, Brown had a major stroke, severely impacting his dominant right side.

Jody Brown explained that he never considered not painting. For the first months, with extraordinary support and profound determination, he relearned how to walk — movement that required concentration through the rest of his life. He then tackled painting with his left hand.

In a 2017 interview, Brown said, "I didn't try to go back to where I was before the stroke, so I had to go for what I could do. I found a way to paint that was pleasant for me."



Ray Brown: "Untitled", Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

His brushwork and approach were looser than in his previous work — a quality that he had been contemplating before his health redirected him. As always, he painted daily. Trips he and Jody took to Italy beginning in 2008 had a profound influence on his work with bold colors and blocks of color taking on new prominence.

Brown's exploration brought about new abstracted work. With time, he also turned to a fresh round of more representational work including still lifes and landscapes inspired by drawings in his sketchbook.

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Ray Brown: "Untitled Heart Relief Plaque", Jeb Wallace-Brodeur