



Installation view, *Late Night Trip to the Jewellers*, 2018, from "The Witching Hour," The Esker Foundation, Calgary. © Vanessa Brown. Photo: John Dean.

Vanessa Brown

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Esker Foundation

Purple, pastel blues, greens, pinks, and iridescent white inhabit the works in Vanessa Brown's recent exhibition "The Witching Hour." Brown presents a synthesis of delicacy and brute strength, demonstrating a fine balance between feminist aesthetics and traditional sculpture. Her work exemplifies a feminized practice epitomized through steel, a material associated with industry, "male" sculpture, and warfare.

"The Witching Hour" was at once a dreamscape, a jewelry store, and a wonderland of opulence and mystery. A boudoir scene greeted viewers on entering the gallery. An oversize clock

frowned over the scene, winking away the time; two sheer kimonos made from mesh fabric hung from steel frames; and delicate earrings made of glass and steel, sized for a giant, dangled from a frame, while another pair rested on the floor. Two oversize ashtrays, one with cigarette in place, completed the tableau. Hanging nearby, a large tablet etched with symbols spelled out a mystifying dream sequence in a language understood only by the artist. Macro versus micro played into this *mise en scène*, with intimate, small-scale objects blown up in scale. This deliberate shift transported viewers across a threshold into a world where personal moments are reimagined as a psychic escape from reality.

Leaving the boudoir, which was titled *Late Night Trip to the Jeweller's*, viewers entered a gallery that doubled as a virtual jewelry shop. Here, Brown scaled down her work, unveiling another aspect of her practice. Smaller sculptures in pearlescent hues, resembling vases and centerpieces, sat on plinths. Rods strewn with various sculptures punctuated the space, offering Brown's version of charm bracelets. These elongated forms took on an almost mystical effect while again playing with scale. Stretched and unfurled, they told stories through the sequence of the attached pieces. For Brown, the body, especially the female body, is a salient reference point; her works demonstrate what is achievable with the body while also speaking to what the body knows.

There is an aspect of whimsy in Brown's ability to exaggerate with material and scale while also playing with subject matter. Within these scenes, which evoked what she calls interstitial spaces, viewers found themselves between reality and reverie. After the boudoir and jewelry gallery, viewers happened upon a complex, larger-than-life mobile engaged in a dance of form and shape as it twisted in the purple light of an imagined greenhouse. The greenhouse, while seemingly simple, disrupted the binary between masculine and feminine that often defines the materiality of sculptural work.

“The Witching Hour” was an accomplished show. Each carefully curated environment was designed to submerge the viewer in an alternate consciousness. The result was an envisioning of what could be seen as a form of armor. Brown infuses a material that evolved from strength and virility with delicacy, intimacy, and emotionality, reinterpreting the role of steel in contemporary art.—