



RAGNA BRUNO

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# RAGNA BRUNO

JULY 10 – AUGUST 4, 2023

## Colors in Conversation

Essay by Chris Crosman



*Yellow Landscape*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches

FRONT COVER *AGUA*, detail, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

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6 court street ellsworth, maine 04605 [courthousegallery.com](http://courthousegallery.com) 207 667 6611



*Night in the Garden*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



*Wild Trees*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



*In Full Sunshine*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



*Scribbles*, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches

# RAGNA BRUNO COLORS IN CONVERSATION

by Chris Crosman

*There may well be allusions to music or weather or dance or anything conjured by a viewer's personal memory archive. We are made to notice, above all else, the movement of Bruno's hand, her touch and her presence on the canvas. — Chris Crosman*

Silence is the only plausible response to the pure, light-distilling paintings by Ragna Bruno. It is no surprise she came to painting through classical dance and music, two time-based mediums where narrative and meaning unfold over the course of minutes, hours, sometimes days. Time is essential to our experience of dance or music or film and theater. Painting is different. For viewers, if not the artist, it happens all at once. Slow and fast passages, color, texture, shapes and images are taken in and experienced at a glance. At some point in our ancestral, pre-verbal cognition an ability to instantly record sights and process visual information was our most important survival skill, a way to track prey before it escaped our dinner plans; or, even more importantly, we escaped theirs. As we explore her nuanced paintings details coalesce, merge and move—dance.

“What you see is what you see,” as Frank Stella once dryly replied to a critic looking for subject matter in one of his Minimal pinstripe abstractions.

So, it happens with Bruno's work; it has immediacy of form and in the making of it. That said, her paintings also reveal themselves and their underlying complexity through close looking. Her paintings clearly have roots in Post-war American abstraction and artists like Willem De Kooning, Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, Jackson Pollock, and Grace Hartigan among many others. Robert Motherwell's *Spanish Elegies* and his homages to poets like Federico Garcia Lorca may be relevant, along with the painterly grids of Richard Diebenkorn's California streetscapes. We are reminded, too, of important post-War European masters—the greyed silences of Giorgio Morandi; Cy Twombly's scrawling graffiti and occasional



AGUA, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

quotations from antique Greek and Roman sources (an American, he worked most of his life in Rome); the exquisitely balanced, softly delineated geometries of Ben Nicholson; and the great Spanish master, Antoni Tàpies, all blood and sand.

Both easel-size and her smaller works recall musical etudes. Their basic color “signatures” evoke themes and variations; she composes works that



*Interstice*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches

are often about suggestion and shadow, rather than precise description. For example, flesh-colored backgrounds instigate nude figures gently waking from softly drawn outlines. Meandering scribbles turn into mirror writing in several examples—legible

if you know they are there. Loosely drawn passages echo words and writing, their twisting, cursive lines alluding to meaning more elusive, perhaps, than mere words can reveal. Bruno treasures poetry (her father was a poet), and she permits viewers to reflect on visual equivalencies to poetry, the slippages and layered meanings attaching to art that touches.

Her work is akin to that of the virtuoso pianist—which Bruno was in her youth—whose fingers lift sounds from within a keyboard, not by pushing the keys. In visual terms, the chromaticism of black keys add a kind of soft, undertone of dissonance that is present in *Night Song* where loose black patches seem to be escaping toward the light and away from the diagonally placed larger blocks/chords of blacks and greys. She says, “without dissonance there can be no harmony.”

Trained as a pianist, danseuse, and married to a composer (Werner Torcanowsky), musical analogies abound: Bach and romantic masters such as Schumann, Schubert and Brahms are among the composers she listens to while painting. More surprising, perhaps, is her fondness for John Cage and Philip Glass, though not so unusual when considering Bruno’s visual syntax of silences and close tonal harmonies shifting imperceptibly. Given Bruno’s immersion in music and dance throughout her long life, there is an apt quote from a recent biography



*Night Song*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

about Mozart by Jan Swafford: that Mozart, “thought deeply but in tones, felt mainly in tones, and steeped himself in the worlds he was creating with tones.” It seems Bruno’s paintings aspire to something like that and more. There is a gentle insistence that her mirror writing, like a diary, is meant to be private, hiding in plain sight, the whispered remembrance of personal stories and feelings. Or, her “writing” can be just a linear gesture in the context of the artist’s multilingual international heritage and training; painting as its own universal language of pure mark-making.

Music and poetry notwithstanding, Bruno is a painter in Maine where she has lived full-time for the past half-century. Nature has a way of enforcing attention to what really matters: light, atmosphere, water. Her *Transient Cloud* reads as the fullness of all three. Viewed as air and movement, it somehow retains balance and weight across the entire surface—perhaps, the truest test of pure abstraction. The same can be said of *Filtered Snow*, capturing the infinite gradations of white and earth seen most abundantly in Maine’s interminably long mud seasons. Her father was German and her mother Swedish. Bruno’s northern European roots seep into her paintings like the suddenness of winter in Maine.

Bruno’s recent paintings are relatively modest in scale. Occasionally, with their square format, these paintings are neither windows nor doors, inside nor

outside, wall nor landscape. Or, they can simultaneously be all those things or, simply, what the viewer wishes to see including pure abstraction. The square canvas is a classic modernist convention, utilized by artists from the late nineteenth century into the present. The American impressionist, Childe Hassam, often use the square to frame his visions of the Isle of Shoals. The square tells us precisely what we are looking at—which is to say, a painting. We do not have to remember Maurice Denis’ famous quote (known to every art student): “Remember that a painting — before it is a battle horse, a nude model, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” Bruno gives suggestive titles to her works, and we are, of course, welcome to bring our own associations to her paintings. But, beyond all conventions and historical precedents they remain, adamantly, insistently, independent.

In Bruno’s work, there is another essential attribute of great art, as identified by Denis: *sincerity*. There may well be allusions to music or weather or dance or anything conjured by a viewer’s personal memory archive. We are made to notice, above all else, the movement of Bruno’s hand, her touch and her presence on the canvas. In Bruno’s art, touch and gesture vary—from breath on glass exhalation to the bumps, ridges, and divots of Mediterranean



*Transient Cloud*, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



Filtered Snow, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches

stucco and a lambent, flickering light across its surface. Passages are dragged and blended, dry and opaque, or wet flooding into wet. The process is like us; it has secrets and layers. Individual works are just that, resolutely themselves—different as to how they are individually structured with gentle precision yielding openly ambiguous and intimate quietude.

Bruno has lived and worked in many places, here and abroad. But, she says that she “needs Spain” where her parents settled and where she grew up. She returns to Madrid and family each year like the California cliff swallows to Mission San Juan de Capistrano. The conversations her colors have are often with the Spanish earth seen through northern eyes: burnt sienna and umber, ochre, dun, ecru, russets along with myriad shades of higher-keyed slate-blue and grey mixing with white and black. And, these conversations seem louder or softer in inverse proportion to the size of her paintings. Larger works seem more reticent, quiet, while small paintings—the eight by ten-inch works—often throw off sudden sparks of intensity with lightning-like gestures, as in her *Blue Shapes*. Bruno literally sees color differently than other people; a purple to most is green to her. Or, rather, what she sees is the complex combination of many colors built up from successive underlying layers of colors; suffused and dense, many have no names.

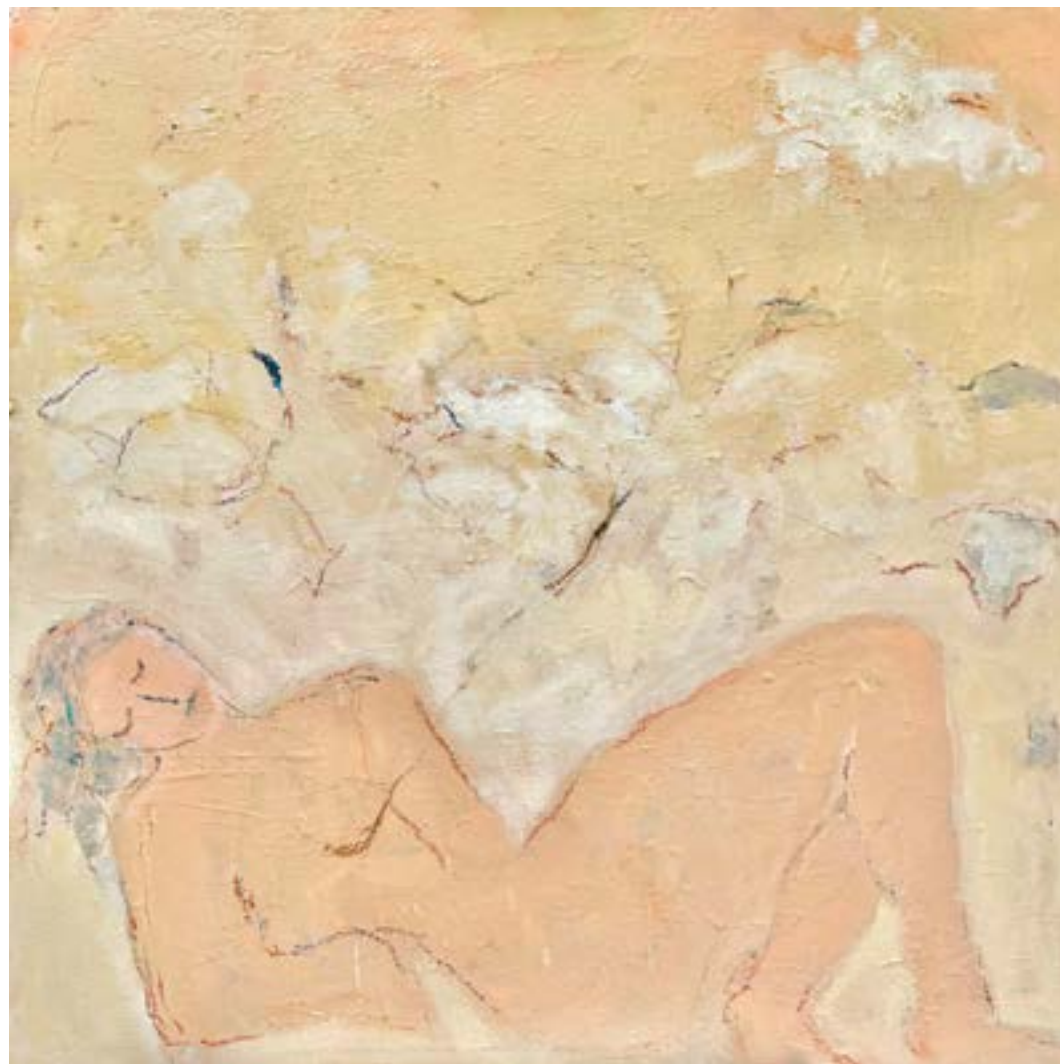


Blue Shapes, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



Blue Shape, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches





*Dreaming Woman*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

Bruno's *Dreaming Woman* emerges from her rumpled background like some primal earth goddess rising from her bed in the Spanish Pyrenees. Her direct ancestors include Goya's *La Maja Desnuda* (*The Nude Maja*) and Picasso's early Rose period painting, *La Toilette*. *Dreaming Woman*, perhaps, dreams of how art begets ever new art, especially by those artists who dream. She pays homage to painterly predecessors, but is also of her own time and place, preserving her own lost youth and passionate presence in a challenging, changing world.

As always, Bruno's work brings questions, mostly asking how style and process inform content, mood, meaning. Are those zig-zagging lines the marks left by her brush or by its opposite rounded wooden tip? Is this passage scraped to reveal underlying layers or is it laid down over earlier brush strokes? What are these closely keyed colors called? Are the colors mixed by the artist or are your eyes doing the blending? There is believable, factual sincerity as evidenced in the directness of her painterly process. But, it's also, impossible not to think about the seductions of our own visual memory—I think of John Singer Sargent's small romantic masterpiece of seventeen year-old Rosina Ferrara dancing the tarantella on a rooftop in Capri under a distant moon—forever full and rising. We probably should not ask of any painting anything more than what we can see on its



*Reclining Figure*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches

surface. Yet, Bruno admits that she is constantly moving when she paints. In her paintings, dance is always there, too.

CHRIS CROSSMAN was director of the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, from 1988 to 2005, and the founding chief curator of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. As a young museum educator in the early 1970s, Crossman learned about the importance of place to the work of most artists when he co-directed *The Video Vasari*, a ground-breaking on location video interview program. Crossman lives in Thomaston, Maine, and occasionally writes about artists with Maine ties like Jon Imber, whose work he has long admired.



*In the Distance*, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches



*Blue Prism*, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



*Lilac Light*, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches



*Music at Dawn*, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches



*Indigo Feeling*, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches



*The Blues*, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



*Joyous Moment*, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches



*Movement in the Garden*, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches



*Yellow Tree*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



*Problem Solved*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



Yellow Landscape, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



Summer, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches



*Landscape with Tree*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



*Falling Stars*, oil on board, 8 x 10 inches



# RAGNA BRUNO



Ragna Bruno was born in Madrid, Spain, the daughter of a German father, and a Swedish mother. She was raised in a multilingual family and is fluent in Spanish, German, English, and French. Throughout her early life, Bruno studied dance, music, and art in Madrid, Switzerland, and London. Her father was a poet and businessman, who came from a long line of artists and architects; her mother, a sculptor who spoke six languages. Their friends were artists and musicians, and Bruno grew up immersed in the arts at home and at school. From the age of fourteen until she went to study abroad, Bruno made it a point to visit the Prado Museum every-day, walking a half hour each way.

Bruno travelled extensively in Europe, Central and South America, and India. She owned an antique store in Madrid, and cofounded BERMÚSICA, an international concert management company based in Madrid with its own concert series, “Orchestras of the World.”

In 1975, Bruno came to the United States to marry Werner Torkanowsky, a world renowned conductor. The couple moved to Hancock, Maine, in 1977. Here Bruno was able to pursue her passion for art and committed to being a full-time artist. Bruno continues to live and maintain a studio in Hancock, and visits Spain frequently to see family and friends.

## ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Ellsworth, Maine 2013, '15, '17, '19, '21, '23  
She-Bear Gallery, Portland, Maine 2014  
Husson College, Bangor, Maine 2006  
Between the Muse Gallery, Rockland, Maine 1997  
Leighton Gallery, Blue Hill, Maine 1984–2011

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Ellsworth, Maine 2012–2021  
New York Institute Of Technology, New York, New York 2011, '12  
International Drawing Project DINA-4 in Malaga, Spain 2011  
Aarhus Gallery, “White Show,” Belfast, Maine 2011  
Aarhus Gallery, “Grid Works,” Belfast, Maine 2010  
Maine Art Scene Virtual Show 2010, '12, '13  
Blue Hill Library, Summer Show, Blue Hill, Maine 2009, '11  
Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Small Works, Ellsworth, Maine 2007  
Wheaton College, “Eros Logos,” Norton, Massachusetts 2006  
Blue Hill, Bristol, Rhode Island 2005  
Deborah Davis Fine Art Gallery, Hudson, New York 2004  
McPherson College of Art, Catalog Award 1991  
Mountain Arts, Sugarloaf, Maine 1988  
Pleiades Gallery, Soho, New York 1988  
Leighton Gallery, Blue Hill, Maine 1988  
Union of Maine Visual Artists, College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, Maine  
Chautauqua Exhibition of American Art

## PUBLICATIONS

Daniel Kany. *Maine Sunday Telegram*, July 2013  
“The 60 Most Collectible Artist In Maine,” *Maine Home + Design*, April 2010  
Jakimides, Annaliese. “The Canvas,” *Maine Home + Design*, September, 2010

## PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Poetry Festival, collaboration with poet Cate Marvin, Belfast, 2017  
Owner of an antique gallery in Madrid, Spain,  
specializing in antique museum quality frames  
Co-founder of IBERMÚSICA, an international concert management  
with its own concert series “Orchestras of the World”

## EDUCATION

Studied Music and Dance, Madrid Conservatory, Madrid, Spain  
Art History and Languages, Lausanne, Switzerland, and London, England  
Life Drawing at Escuela de San Fernando, Madrid, Spain  
Clay Sculpture with Squidge Davis  
Printing with Fran Merritt, Haystack School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine



*Cloudy Day, oil on board, 10 x 8 inches*

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