

The art of Byron Browne (1907-1961) has yet to be examined in the context of Abstract Expressionism. In a recent study of the period which argued for the necessity of investigating the work of artists like Byron Browne, Carl Holty, Karl Knaths, Balcomb Greene, and Charles Seliger in order to evaluate the formative years of Abstract Expressionism, its author, carried away by an agenda of political partisanship, failed to discuss the pictures themselves.¹ Nor is there any attempt to explore what artists like Browne actually sought to express in their paintings. This is a startling omission in a book that reproduces four works by Browne in comparison to only three by the much-celebrated Jackson Pollock.

The occasion of this essay is the exhibition of a selection of Browne's abstract work from the 1930s through the 1950s. Some of these works have never before been shown and others have not been seen since the time they were produced. Browne's career prior to the 1940s has received relatively more attention.² His role during the 1930s, as a founding member of the American Abstract Artists group, has by now been adequately discussed.³ His work of this same decade was recently featured in a major museum exhibition, "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944."⁴

Browne's earliest training had been at the conservative National Academy where he studied from 1925 to 1928 with Charles Hinton, Charles Hawthorne, Charles Courtney Curran, Ivan Olinsky, Robert Aitken, and Alice Murphy. Not long after he won an award for his conventional still-life painting in the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design in 1928, Browne rejected academicism and destroyed these traditional works.

About this time, evidently while attending a Norman Rockwell exhibition, Browne met Arshile Gorky, the Armenian emigré who was then teaching evening life and antique classes at the Grand Central School of Art. Gorky, who was already a great admirer of Cézanne, was then also painting Synthetic Cubist still lifes after Braque and Picasso. This must have contributed to the rapport between the two artists; Browne had been visiting The Gallery of Living Art since it opened at New York University with Albert Gallatin's collection in December of 1927. There he saw works by important European modernists, eventually including Picasso, Braque, Miró, Arp, and Masson. As he turned to abstract art, Browne would make much of their innovations.

Browne's lyrical abstract collages of the 1930s, such as [*Confrontation*] and [*Ionic Reticule*], suggest his interest in the torn paper collages and organic forms of Jean Arp. In his oil *Butterfly* of 1945, there are shapes and patterned areas reminiscent of Picasso's canvases like the *Girl Before a Mirror* of 1932 which Browne, like his contemporary Pollock, admired in the Museum of Modern Art.⁵ But there are also references to Miró's personages which are even more apparent in Browne's oil *Figure* of 1947, where not only the central figure with its antennae and concentric circular eyes looks like a creature from Miró, but the Spanish artist's characteristic eight-pointed stars dot the background.

In 1935, Browne studied briefly with Hans Hofmann at the school the German emigré and future Abstract Expressionist had opened in New York in 1933. He did not continue this study as he evidently felt that he already understood Hofmann's theories, one of which was the importance of working from nature.⁶ While Browne was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists and eagerly admired the work of European modernists, he never renounced nature.

In a notebook Browne began in June 1937 and continued to write in through the late 1950s, he insisted: "When I hear the words non-objective, intra-subjective, avant-garde and such trivialities, I run. There is only visible nature, visible to the eye or, visible by mechanical means, the telescope, microscope, etc."⁷ This statement is important not only because it points to Browne's continuing attachment to nature, but also because it reveals his fascination with mechanical ways to explore nature. Included in this notebook are pictures clipped from newspapers and magazines of air and naval radar devices, airplane propellers, high-wire tension posts, and other machinery.

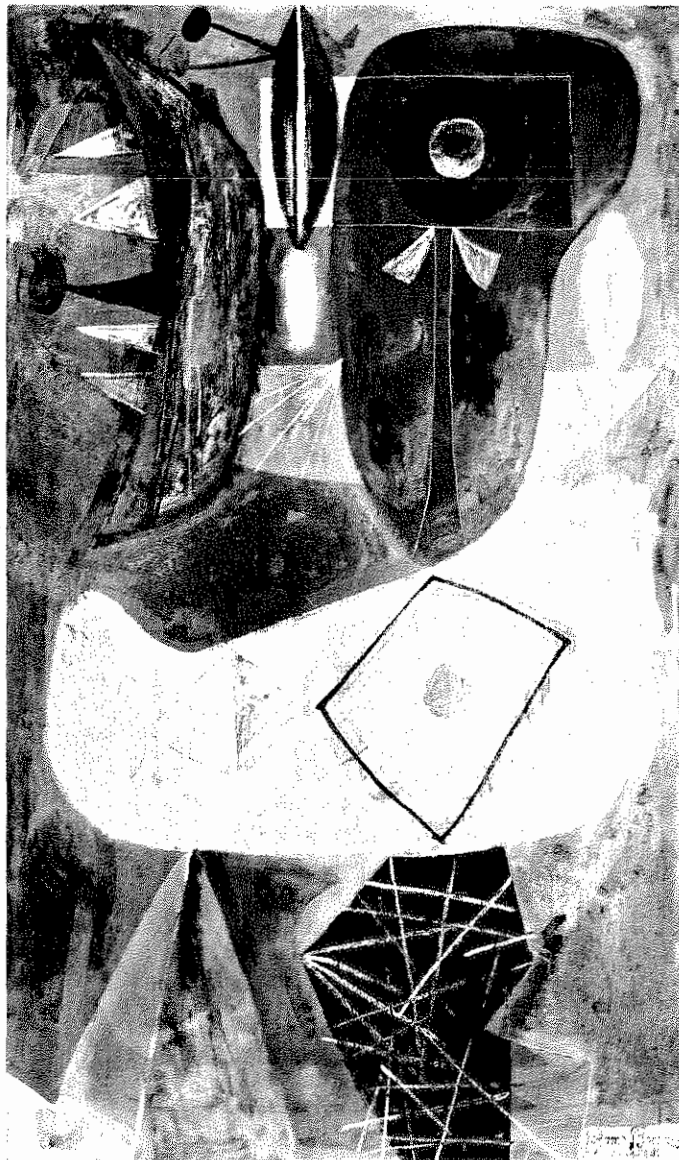
The statement quoted above most likely dates to late 1949, just after Samuel Kootz had organized and promoted a group of Browne's contemporaries as "The Intrasubjectives" in an exhibition held at the

BYRON BROWNE IN THE CONTEXT OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

GAIL LEVIN

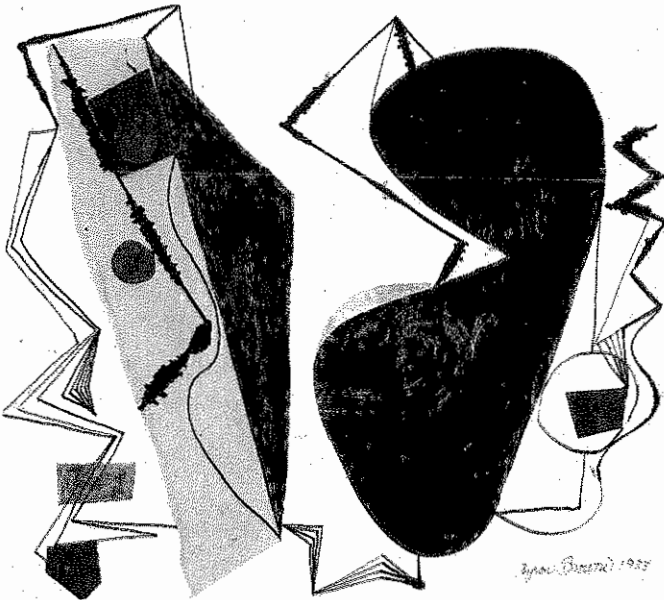
Byron Browne's art of the mid-1940s and 1950s coincides with many of the directions and experiments of the Abstract Expressionists. Yet he had a mind of his own and never completely abandoned a more classical approach.

Byron Browne,
Titan, 1953-54.
Oil on canvas,
60 x 36".
Courtesy
Meredith
Long Gallery.



Kootz Gallery at 600 Madison Avenue from September 14 to October 3, 1949. The artists Kootz included under this rubric were William Baziotis, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Morris Graves, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, and Bradley Walker Tomlin. Kootz had been Browne's dealer since the opening of his gallery in January 1945 until mid-1948 when Browne joined the Grand Central Gallery.⁸ Browne must have felt dismissed by Kootz's catalogue statement which grouped "artists who have been able to arrive at Abstraction through Cubism: Marin, Stuart Davis, Demuth, among others," and promoted instead the Intrasubjective artist who he claimed "invents from personal experience, creates from an internal world rather than an external one."

When Browne condemned "non-objective" art, he referred to the work promoted by the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, the precursor of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In the 1940s, this collection was dominated by the taste of the German follower of Theosophy, Hilla Rebay, who preached: "To free ourselves from absorption in external objects is called Non-Objectivity."⁹ The collection featured the work of Rebay's two favorites, Wassily Kandinsky and Rudolf Bauer. Browne had little interest in Rebay's oriental mysticism, stating in his notebook: "Religion is for those who do not think and do not care to wonder!" He also asserted: "There is only one religion – the brotherhood of man."

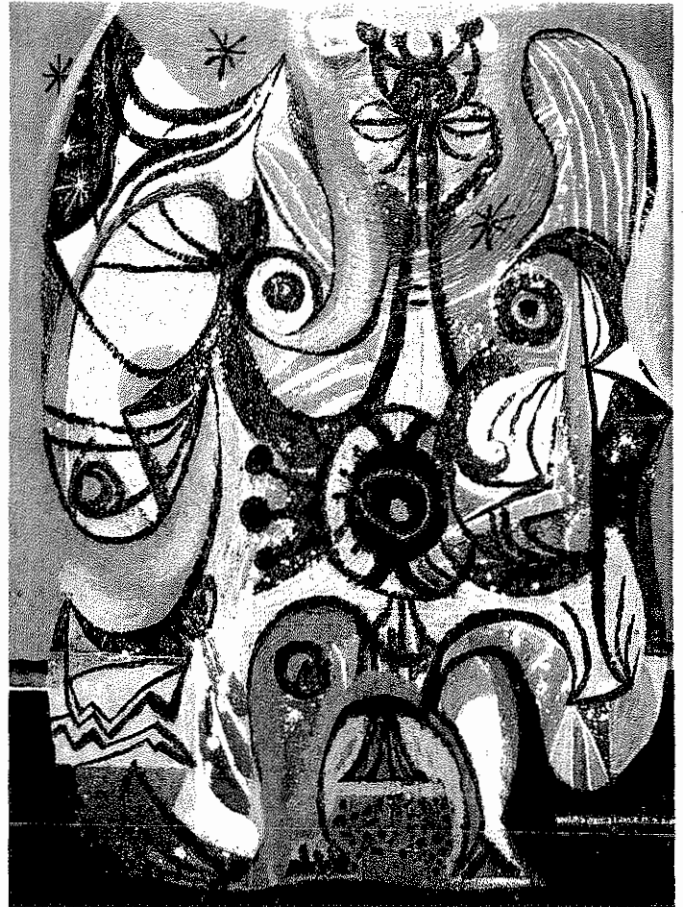


Throughout his notebook Browne repeatedly expressed his belief in the primacy of nature which was so firm that he argued: "There is no such thing as non-objective painting. All shapes, forms, colors and combinations of such exist in nature. One only has to look and one will see. Man cannot imagine what does not exist already." He even considered that art was "a summary of man's attempt to find his place in nature." Browne revealed: "I always paint with one eye on nature," and he advised with conviction: "To know design, go to nature."

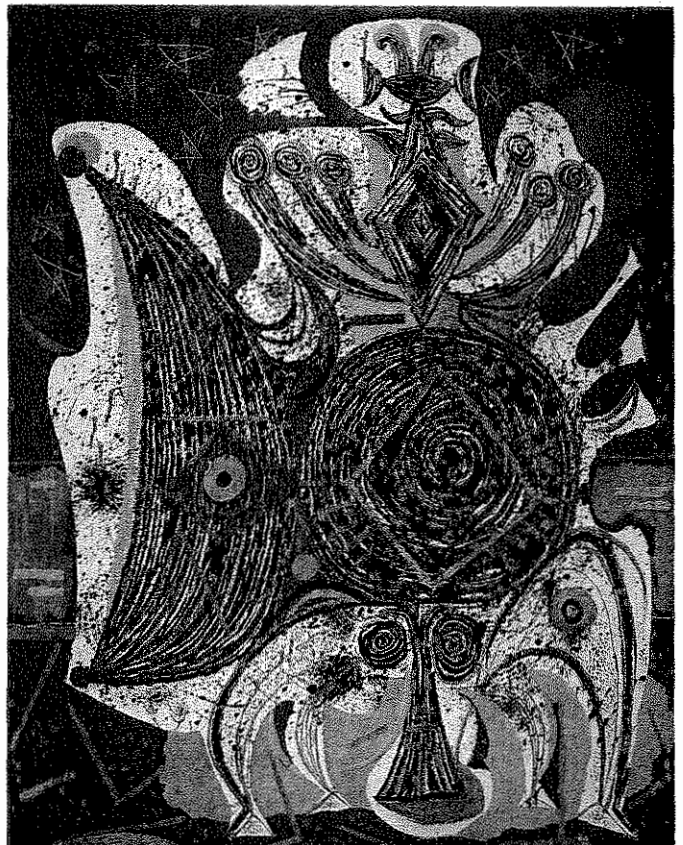
Browne communicated these ideas on nature in classes at the Art Students League, where he first taught life drawing, painting, and composition in 1948. A hand-painted poster with collaged elements (produced in the summer of 1949 in Provincetown to show to his students the next fall) demonstrates how he considered the development of an idea from:

1. Sea Forms (crustaceans)
2. Scientific Apparatus
3. Other Sources.

The latter consisted in this case of a stone monument from Scotland, a picture of which he had included in his poster. He had also pasted on the picture of a "sun radar," representing an example of a scientific apparatus. Collages of a crab and a hermit crab are clearly visi-



◀Byron Browne, [Confrontation], 1933. India ink, watercolor, and cut paper, 15½ x 17¼". Courtesy Meredith Long Gallery.



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◀Byron Browne, Figure,
1947. Oil on canvas board,
16 x 12". Courtesy
Meredith Long Gallery.



Byron Browne, Apollyon,
1953. Oil on canvas, 60 x
36". Courtesy Meredith
Long Gallery.

◀Byron Browne,
Sea Creature, 1948.
Oil on canvas,
38 x 30". Courtesy
Meredith Long Gallery.



Byron Browne, *Self-Portrait*, 1939.
Pencil on paper, 17 1/4 x 12 1/8".
Courtesy Meredith Long Gallery.

Browne reveal how he transformed such images into his seemingly abstract compositions.

Examples of such transformations from the reality Browne observed to his abstract creations are frequent among his canvases of the late Forties and early Fifties. In *Sea Creature* (1948), we can deduce that Browne's crescent moon actually evolved from the apparatus he labeled a sun radar. The protrusions at the top center of *Stele* (1949) appear to relate to those on the stone monument from Scotland. *Apollyon* (1953) combines many of these same forms in a cacophony of tumultuous animation.

Among the students who enrolled in Browne's classes at the League were several who were to make names for themselves in the art world: Robert Rauschenberg, Nicolas Krushenick, Paul Jenkins, and Gene Thornton. The latter credits Browne, whom he recalled as being "shy," with first making him aware of "patterns of dark and light in a painting" and teaching him that "they were not just accidental."¹⁰ In 1953, Browne told an interviewer: "In teaching I try to help the student acquire a background . . . I have always admired the discipline of the cubists: to me they are in the direct line of tradition making the logical connection between the past and the twentieth century."¹¹

Browne's involvement with nature is alluded to by many of the titles he gave to his paintings during the 1940s and 1950s, for example: *Butterfly* (1945 and 1947), *Sea Image* (1948), *Sea Creature* (1948), *Oceanic* (1948), and *The Rites of Spring* (1950).¹² His closeness to nature was furthered by his decision to spend his summers, beginning in 1946, in Provincetown on Cape Cod. That first summer Browne, his wife the painter Rosalind Bengelsdorf, and their three-year-old son, Stephen, would go sailing with Adolph and Esther Gottlieb.

Gottlieb, an Abstract Expressionist who would show at the Kootz Gallery the following January, was already painting his pictographs, which use a grid structure and a vocabulary of signs borrowed from primitive art, mythology, and other sources. Browne had certainly shared this interest in primitive art. As early as 1934, he had painted abstractions based on variations of primitive masks which he knew from the Museum of Natural History, his friend John Graham, and other sources. And Gottlieb had earlier painted ocean imagery such as that in his oil, *The Sea Chest* of 1942. Browne must have been sympathetic with the letter Gottlieb, together with his friend Mark Rothko, had written to *The New York Times* on June 13, 1943, stressing: "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art."¹³

When Browne was studying sculpture with Robert Aitken at the National Academy in the late 1920s, he found that his interest in modern art and primitive art was frowned upon by the conservative faculty. He recalled:

One day I pinned a reproduction of an African mask to the wall. In came Mr. Aitken, noticed what I had done, but at first

came, and said, pointing to the mask: "Don't you know those things were done by ignorant stupid people? If you work like that you'll have to leave the class!"¹⁴

Browne was quick to reject the values of academic art and moved on to investigate the issues of modernism. By the end of the 1920s, he was already working in a style influenced by Cubism.

About 1936, Browne worked together with de Kooning, assisting Fernand Léger in making preparatory sketches for a series of murals commissioned by the French Line, a ship company. The project was never completed due to Léger's dismissal by the officials of the French Line, who were offended by the French artist's left-wing political sympathies. At this time, Léger worked in both a figurative and a more organic, abstract style. De Kooning, too, was alternating between figurative and abstract compositions. Browne also worked in two styles simultaneously. For example, his highly resolved abstract geometric mural for Studio D at WYNC radio station in 1939 contrasts dramatically with his classically rendered, intense *Self-Portrait* drawing of that year or with his Ingresque oil, *Portrait of Eleanor Zariief*, painted the next year.¹⁵

Browne and de Kooning shared the friendship of the influential Russian emigré, artist, and writer, John Graham. When Browne had an exhibition of his work at the Artists' Gallery in March 1938, it was Graham who wrote the text, saluting the gallery for its "constructive taste" and praising Browne for his "discriminating and exact usage of color and selective usage of articulating shapes."¹⁶

When Samuel Kootz published his book, *New Frontiers in American Painting* in 1943, he grouped Browne together with Stuart Davis, George L.K. Morris, Carl Holty, Jan Matulka, and Graham, as pursuing abstraction as "a direct progression from Cubism."¹⁷ He criticized many of the artists he placed under the heading of "Abstract and Non-objective Painting," including Gorky, Graham, and Browne, whose work he saw as "hopping from lively abstractions to representational work that is not too far removed from academism."¹⁸ He dismissed the latter but celebrated Browne's "abstract inventions," which he saw as having "brilliant color harmonies" and a "spare rightness in space divisions [that] are highly rewarding."¹⁹

A year later, when Sidney Janis included Browne's work in his book on abstract art in America, he linked it with the work of the future Abstract-Expressionist Lee Krasner, as he claimed that both artists used "accents" of "later cubist work."²⁰ Browne, who was quoted as describing his abstract painting *Head* of 1942 as a "globular vortex of vanities," insisted: "Since my work is always more or less involved with the object, I prefer to describe its content as a symbol rather than to discuss in a pedantic manner its plastic structure."²¹

By the end of the 1940s, many of the Abstract-Expressionist painters mentioned above—Pollock, de Kooning, Gorky, Krasner, Gottlieb, and Hofmann—had abandoned representation and Cubist-inspired abstraction for a more gestural style of abstract painting without obvious figuration. In de Kooning's case, he would return to the female figure in his paintings of the 1950s, but they remained highly gestural and expressionistic, a great departure from his classical figures of the 1930s. We must ask then if Browne's works of the late 1940s and 1950s place him among these Abstract Expressionists with whom he had various friendships and associations.

Certainly Browne's gestural canvas *Dionysiac* of 1956, although it lacks the delicate fluidity of its predecessor, relates in its shapes and overall arrangement to Gorky's organic paintings of about a decade earlier. While [*Images at Night*]²²—a work on paper of 1949 which has a strange central shape with pointed protrusions, containing smaller forms (crescents, circles, or other irregular shapes) and placed within a rectangle—specifically recalls Gottlieb's canvas *Persephone* of 1942, it is distinguished by Browne's use of intense colors and rich and varied surface patterns and textures.

Browne also utilized mythology as did many of the Abstract Expressionists. His canvas *Titan* of 1953-54 refers to one of the family of giants who were born to Uranus and Gaea and who ruled the earth until overthrown by the Olympian gods. Browne's interest in mythology would have been encouraged by the time he spent working during the 1940s as a guard in the Greek and Roman section at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His abstract image of the giant in

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shapes similar to those that appear in the work of his contemporaries, Abstract Expressionists Theodoros Stamos and William Bazotes. Browne sometimes exhibited with the latter in exhibitions at the Kootz Gallery. The concentric circle or target shape in the upper right corner and the crescent form on the upper left of *Titan*, as well as the palette of earth tones, recall the work of Stamos, who was also preoccupied with myth and the forces of nature.

Paraphrasing a quote of Cézanne's about Impressionism, Browne wrote in his notebook in 1954: "I would like to make abstract expressionism into something solid like the art of museums." At another time, he noted: "I sometimes paint the object more, I sometimes paint the object less, but by all means I must paint the object." He admitted: "I care nothing for style, that bugaboo of the arts used by dealers for commercial purpose. I am only interested in interpreting nature in every possible way I can." Browne's art of the mid-Forties and Fifties coincides with many of the directions and experiments of the Abstract Expressionists. Yet he had a mind of his own and never completely yielded to the vogue for angst-filled canvases without figurative imagery. He remained faithful to a more classical approach and never renounced his optimistic tie to nature.

1. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 10.
2. For the only significant article to survey Browne's entire career, see Greta Berman, "Byron Browne: Builder of American Art," *Arts Magazine* (December 1978), pp. 98-102.
3. See April J. Paul, "Byron Browne in the Thirties: The Battle for Abstract Art," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1979), pp. 9-24.
4. John R. Lane and Susan C. Larsen, editors, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944*, organized by the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1983; catalogue (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.) with an essay on Browne by April J. Paul, pp. 56-58.
5. Pollock's *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* of 1943 reveals the artist's careful study of this

same Picasso. See my discussion of this in Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 98-99.

6. When Hofmann was introduced to Jackson Pollock by Lee Krasner, he recommended that Pollock enroll in his school and work from nature, prompting the response: "I am nature." (Quoted in Francis V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1967], p. 26.)

7. Browne's notebook is in the collection of his son Stephen B. Browne, who is also the source for unattributed biographical information on the artist.

8. During this time, Kootz evidently declared bankruptcy, closed his gallery, and became a private dealer in Picasso's work. When he reopened in September 1949, Browne remained with the Grand Central Gallery which became Grand Central Moderns. Unlike Kootz, Grand Central paid him a commission on sales, rather than a stipend for all the work he could produce.

9. Hilla Rebay, *Art of Tomorrow*, pamphlet published by the Collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation for Non-Objective Painting, n.d., n.p.

10. Author's interview with Gene Thornton, March 21, 1985. This was a significant contribution to Thornton's development, as, in addition to being a painter, he is now an important photography critic.

11. [Lawrence Campbell], "Byron Browne: Is a Square more Abstract than a Face?," *Arts Students League News*, vol. 6, no. 3 (March 1953), n.p.

12. The titles under discussion here are Browne's own. Those titles in brackets are given by the artist's estate.

13. For a discussion of the letter, see Mary Davis MacNaughton, "Adolph Gottlieb: His Life and Art," in *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: The Arts Publisher, Inc., 1981), p. 40.

14. Browne, quoted in "Byron Browne: Is a Square more Abstract than a Face?," n.p.

15. For a discussion of this style in Browne's art, see Berman, "Byron Browne: Builder of American Art," pp. 99-100. For a discussion of this type of style among Browne's contemporaries, see Melvin P. Lader, "Graham, de Kooning, and the Ingres Revival," *Arts Magazine* (March 1978).

16. John D. Graham, *Byron Browne*, exhibition catalogue, Artists' Gallery, New York, March 1938, n.p.

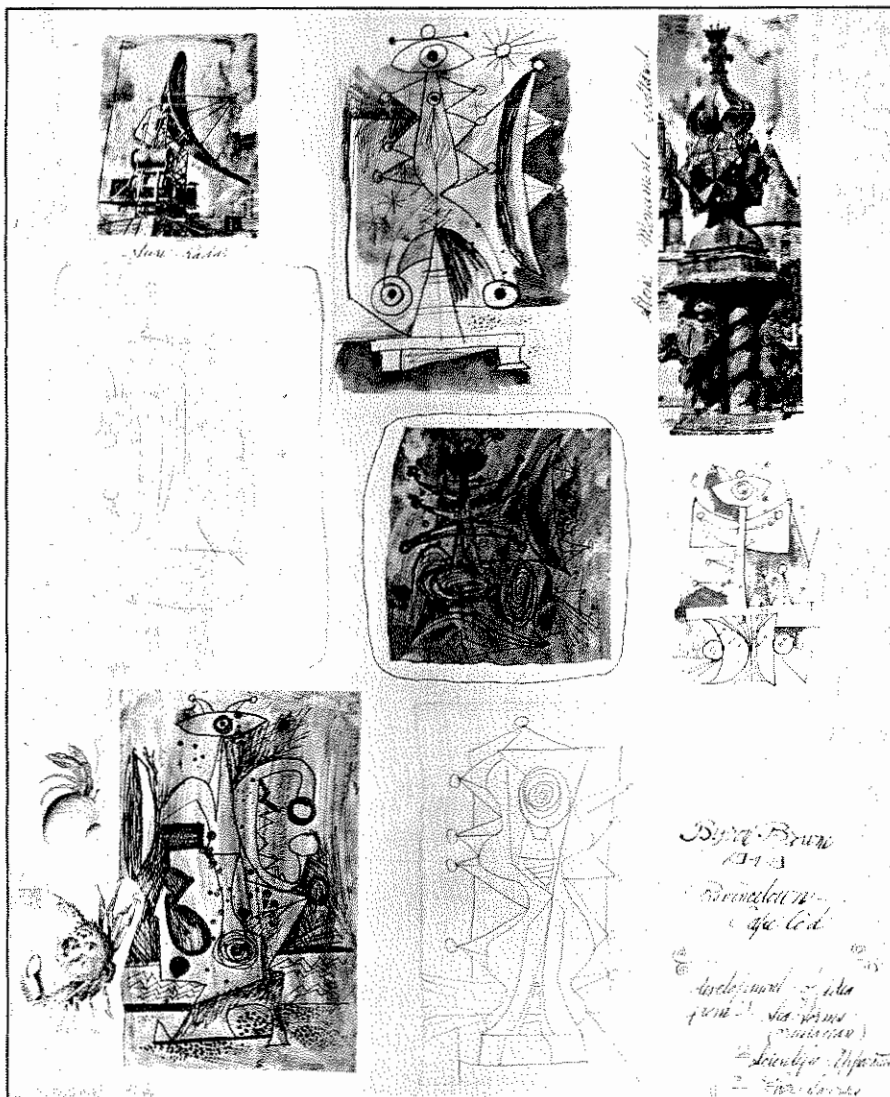
17. Samuel M. Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting* (New York: Hasting House, 1943), p. 48.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944), p. 50.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 56.



Byron Browne, Development of Idea poster, 1949. Courtesy Meredith Long Gallery.