



**ALICE DALTON BROWN**  
**INTERIOR SPACES - EXTERIOR LIGHT**  
**SPRINGFIELD ART MUSEUM, SPRINGFIELD MISSOURI**



# Alice Dalton Brown

Interior Space - Exterior Light

Springfield Art Museum

Missouri

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# The Clear Light Of Alice Dalton Brown

by April Kingsley

Jean-Paul Sartre believed in the profound importance of transparency and dreamed of a world without secrets. It might be said that Alice Dalton Brown shows us that world of perfect openness in her paintings. Nothing frightening lurks behind her curtains, on her cool porches, or inside her sunstreaked rooms. One is conscious only of the light and the peace on entering the spaces she paints. Her columns and lintel-doorways have a lineage extending through centuries of architecture in the service of spirituality, all the way back to Greek temples. Although her buildings frame the human spirit rather than the divine, the very flawlessness of their articulation serves as a reminder of the goal of human perfectability long cherished by the church.

Light is the heart and the spirit of Alice Dalton Brown's endeavor. How it falls on an object or architectural plane, the shadows it casts, and the reflections it bounces back onto other surfaces fascinate her endlessly. Light slips into a room, explores its corners, caresses its contents and then slips out, having once again reacquainted itself with everything inside. But Alice catches the light before it departs, trapping time in its geometries, giving it tangibility by shaping it with shadows, and filling the roomspace with air you'd swear you can touch. Even though she holds it all still for you in such paintings as *Summer Breeze*, 1995, and *Autumn Reverie*, 1998, your mind remembers watching the way moving light makes constantly changing triangles and rectangles in its travels and you reexperience an acute awareness of the planet's rotation and time passing.

Although their subject matter is based in reality, Alice Dalton Brown's paintings express her unconscious—she dreams houses when she isn't painting them. The porch is a place of particular safety, a structured protection from the elements and the vegetation looming just steps away. One doesn't need titles like *Afternoon Calm*, *Golden Corner*, or *Summer Retreat* to tell you what the paintings are so clearly

saying in that regard. These are obviously privileged places where no harm can occur. In other paintings, such as *Lavender Light*, 1992, and *Aurora*, *Six Columns* and *Marianna Entrance*, both 1991, she marshals the columns, spindlework porch supports, and balustrades like soldiers, lining them up across the picture space to defend against the possible onslaught of nature.

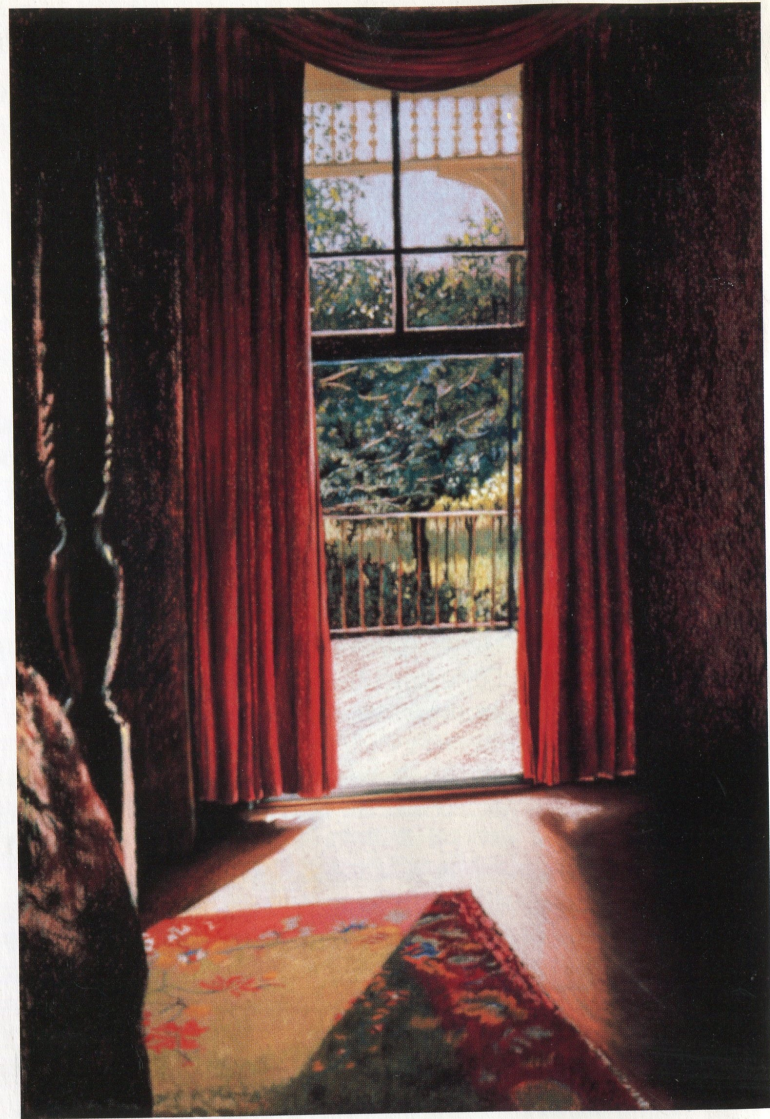
Subtle adjustments affirm the effectiveness of the architectural barricade despite breaks in it for stepping off the porch into "wild" nature. One of these is the lack of steps. They aren't shown except when we are out in nature looking back at the house—in *American Light*, 1994, for instance. In *July Porch*, 1985, she eliminated the support that would have been at the top right of the steps (that aren't pictured) and equalized the spaces between the three central supports, thereby creating an impression of columnar continuity across the shallow spatial field. *Lightwash* and *Glittering Porch*, both 1989, and *Patrick's Porch*, *Patrick's Entrance*, and *Tropical Yard*, all of 1988, have balustrades ostensibly descending with the steps, which almost complete the run of vertical (barrier) lines from one picture side to the other. One feels safe behind them.

"The House" is Alice's self-portrait even though it is never her own home. She lives in an eastside Manhattan apartment, paints in a Chelsea loft with a view of rooftops, and vacations in a modest lakeside cottage in upstate New York. Alice's house is full of deep-seated reminiscences, mainly connected with Victorian houses in and around Ithaca, New York, where she grew up. Some belong to friends since childhood, while others belong to strangers and have only been seen from the outside unless she got to know them. The earliest painting in the exhibition, *Athenaeum Window with Chandelier*, 1983, speaks of wonderful things inside The House—bright, sparkling, expensive things—which are separated from her/us by a succession of barriers—



curtains, window glass, wall, balustrade and flower box. A longing to be inside is expressed which is both personal—she remembered the Athenaeum from her youth as a place for chautauqua-like gatherings of the wealthy from which she was excluded—and universal. Edward Hopper also expressed this feeling, which we all share, of wanting to be inside the warm, light- and ostensibly happiness-filled American house. Hopper's latent voyeurism, which is betrayed by the way he doted on the figures within, is absent from Alice Dalton Brown's paintings, but her identification with the house is very powerful. *A Glimpse Within II*, 1984, and *Interior in Red*, 1992, with their parted red curtains, announce this in no uncertain terms, both Freudian and Feminist.

In many of the earlier paintings in the exhibition *The House* is viewed from the outside. In a few, such as *Path to Back Steps*, 1987, it is barely present—a couple of sturdy horizontal steps suffice to verify the presence of a human structure. In *Pool: Tropical Reflection, Vertical and Palm and Reflections*, both of 1989, the edge of the pool, a strong horizontal, bisects the canvas to establish the same thing. (In Alice's paintings you can usually pinpoint a crucial horizontal that parallels the edge to establish stability, and there are often hidden symmetries to discover which augment that stability in subtle ways.) The House completely dominates nature in some of the other eighties paintings, such as *Four Evening Columns I*, 1986, where the grouped columns make a massive, dominating intrusion into surrounding nature. The pink walls and dappled foliage of the tropical paintings of the late eighties and early nineties introduce a new intensity to the work, both coloristically and compositionally as she explored the myriad shadows and reflections of those sundrenched settings. The unexpectedly rich coloration of the foliage in a painting like *Tropical Yard* seems to speak of a new acceptance, even a celebration of nature's glorious aspects. During the same period she also did a number of paintings and pastels



*Interior in Red*, 1992, pastel on paper, 27 x 18.5"  
Springfield Art Museum Collection, Gift of Curtis and Kathleen Brown





*A Glimpse Within II, 1984, pastel on paper, 50 x 29"*  
*Courtesy of SBC Communications Inc.*

featuring a large American flag, which provided strong color contrasts and allowed her to begin exploring movement and transparency.

Years ago, when she discovered how much more efficient it was to take pictures of sites that intrigued her than it was to do on the spot drawings, Alice changed a working method, but not her methodology. She was (and still is) dealing with sketches and fragments from the real world, which she constructs into pictorial wholes in the studio, adjusting corners, door heights, railing emergence points, eaves or whatever, to build a painting that fits tightly into its rectangle. She is as careful as Hopper or Mondrian about what touches the edge where, crosses something else here, or reaches into a corner there, and about hidden and dynamic symmetries, field closure, overlappings, and tonal progressions. Most of this is worked out in complexly layered collages of drawn and photographic fragments, paint or pastel studies for part or all of the final work, and drawings in which the values are carefully plotted out. But she may still make changes as the painting progresses, taking a window edge out, moving a doorjamb, adding a curtain. She uses a combination of alkyd paints, for their transparency and quick drying, and oils, for their great range of available colors. You can see her brushstrokes, particularly in the foliage and on the floorboards, but, like those of Richard Estes, they create so effective an illusion that you are usually unaware of them as such.

Although Hopper and Estes were the early influences you'd expect them to have been, Alice trod her own path from the outset. Surprisingly, the single most important artist to her was probably Josef Albers from whose book, *The Interaction of Color*, she learned how to structure color by manipulating hues and values. She devised a huge chart with all the colors ranked in graduated series which still hangs in her studio. The tubes of paint she makes up for each painting are numbered according to their place on the gray scale, so she can just



grab the next lighter or darker hue and apply it rather than having to mix it on her palette. The system mimics the way pastels are arranged, which she found so handy. She loves working in pastels and does so on an unexpectedly large scale for the medium. *Aurora, Six Columns* is nearly five feet wide, for example. Since pastel paper doesn't come that large, she makes her own, surfacing the paper with marble dust and pumice. She does get marvelous effects with the medium, as study of the pinks, yellows, and blues on the fluted columns of *Marianna Entrance*, 1991, will reveal. Some of the pastels—*Flag Dream*, 1991, for instance—are on blue paper, which seems to imbue the work with an evening kind of light. The flag in the flag paintings is usually viewed from behind, as we/she are on the porch where the flag is being displayed for passers by. This is slightly disturbing, as, perhaps, was the “flag dream” she had. *American Light*, 1994, in which the flag is the way we expect to see it because we are the passers by, outside looking at the building, conveys the sense that all is right with the world, and America a wonderful place to be.

Overall, that is the feeling one takes away from Alice Dalton Brown's paintings. Death, illness, war, disaster all seem far away. A nexus of personal sadnesses may have been in her mind when she painted *Autumn Reverie* in 1998, and they may be responsible for its elegiac tone, but it is certainly not a statement about her personal life. One of her largest paintings at 107 inches wide, *Autumn Reverie* feels like a triptych showing three states: outside, transitional passage, and inside. The middle section is both in and out side, since the room's baseboard is visible through the glass door, which also reflects two of the columns outside. In the study for it, only one column is reflected and the room is darker and seems bigger. We seem to move closer to the doorway in the final painting. Room and porch are completely vacant, but the light playing over their surfaces and reflected in the

glass seems oddly sensate, as though it was conscious in some manner. *Autumn Reverie* is a consummate work, each of its parts being sufficient in itself as a painting. The room has the quiet purity of a Quaker meeting house or Minimal Art; the center section is a *tour de force* of spatial push/pull and illusion; and the porch feels like a Greek temple in a sylvan setting, though the foliage looks as if it might have been painted by Jackson Pollock. Foliage is a challenge for Alice, as well as a joy, because of her commitment to shadows: fidelity to them can produce incomprehensible shapes, so it is a delicate balancing act for her. The results look like the plants they are, but they also make wonderful abstractions of the Abstract Expressionist variety.

Fascinated as she is by all the things that can happen inside a shadow, Alice makes them come alive. The curtains in *Summer Breeze* cast shadows that dance with anthropomorphic grace, like clothes on a line, and the play of light and shadow on wall and floor is pure geometry, all triangles and trapezoids. Light within light, shadows inside shadows, the empty wall is both boldly and subtly activated. Three 1998 paintings—*Lake Whisper*, *Lake Light (study)*, and *Good Day, Light*—bring Alice and her viewer up to the window/door, part the curtains, and move our gaze out into nature. We pass visually into that sparkling, sun-filled world with only soft, transparent curtains to impede us. All is open, clear and accessible to us. Alice Dalton Brown paints the harmonious days “wherein the world reaches its perfection,” that Ralph Waldo Emerson described in his second essay on nature:

These halcyons may be looked for with a little more assurance in that pure October weather which we distinguish by the name of the Indian summer. The day, immeasurably long, sleeps over the broad hills and warm, wide fields. To have lived through all its sunny hours, seems longevity enough. The solitary places do not seem quite lonely.... Here is sanctity which shames our religions.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brooks Atkinson, ed., *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 1940), 406.