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For more information, contact:

Bobby Moore, Interim Curator

(814) 472-3920

Travis Mearns, Public Relations Coordinator

(724) 238-6015

## **SAMA MUSEUMS PREPARE FOR UNIQUE FOUR-VENUE EXHIBITION OF MAGIC REALIST, COLLEEN BROWNING**

Loretto – The Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art (SAMA) will unveil its remarkable collection of Colleen Browning works this summer when the Museum launches its ambitious simultaneous exhibitions of Browning works at its four locations in Altoona, Johnstown, Ligonier Valley and Loretto. Beginning August 23, SAMA will unveil four separate exhibitions at each Museum site chronicling Browning’s 75-year career.

The exhibitions are part of the Museum’s traveling exhibition, *Colleen Browning: A Brush with Magic*, which has already appeared in Ireland and New York City with dates in Connecticut, Ohio and Texas still to come. With nearly 240 Browning works in its collection, SAMA is the world’s foremost repository for the artist’s work.

The exhibitions begin August 23 at SAMA-Johnstown with *Colleen Browning: Illustrator and Printmaker*, an exhibition that highlights the artist’s commercial illustration and printmaking work, as well as her illustrations for Karen E. Lotz’s children’s book, *Can’t Sit Still*. On August 24, SAMA-Ligonier Valley opens *Colleen Browning: Early Works*. The exhibition charts Browning’s growth from child prodigy to professional artist.

SAMA-Loretto will open *Colleen Browning: Magic Realist* on August 25. This installment includes approximately forty of the artist’s canvases, including masterpieces of Magic Realism drawn from the *Umbrella* and *Subway* series. SAMA-Altoona concludes the exhibition openings with *Colleen Browning: Drawings* on August 27. The exhibition celebrates the artist’s mastery of drawing and includes many works taken from sketchbooks that Browning filled relatively late in her career.

“Visitors will be taken on a life journey from child prodigy to master craftsman,” said SAMA Executive Director, G. Gary Moyer. “The scope of this exhibition across SAMA’s four museums is extraordinary. It is a testament to nurturing one’s creative spirit and artistic talent.”

In addition to the exhibitions, each Museum also will host an opening reception celebrating Browning’s art. SAMA-Johnstown kicks off the excitement with a reception

on August 23, followed by SAMA-Ligonier Valley's reception on August 24. Both receptions will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. and are open to the public free of charge. On August 25, SAMA-Loretto will host a reception including cocktails, dinner and a presentation by Dr. Philip Eliasoph, author of the Museum's new book, *Colleen Browning: The Enchantment of Realism*. Cost for the reception, which runs from 6 to 9 p.m., is \$50 per person, and reservations can be made by calling the Loretto Museum at (814) 472-3920. On Monday, August 27, SAMA-Altoona will host a special *Blue Monday* program in celebration of its exhibition. The event runs from 6 to 8 p.m. and includes live music by Tom McCarty and Friends. Cost is \$20 per person. Call the Altoona Museum at (814) 946-4464 for reservations.

SAMA's Browning celebration culminates in September with the *Colleen Browning Symposium on 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Realism*. The event begins at 10 a.m. on September 10 at SAMA-Loretto and features four distinguished scholars who will speak on Browning and American realist art of the twentieth century. Speakers include Dr. Henry Adams, Dr. Philip Eliasoph, Dr. Gail Levine, and Dr. Jonathan Weinberg. The symposium is designed to animate and expand an ongoing appreciation for realist art from multiple intellectual and artistic viewpoints. Video of the event will be streamed live on the Internet. To watch the podcast, visit <http://tinyurl.com/82vo5p7>.

For comprehensive information on the artist, look for the new monograph, *Colleen Browning: The Enchantment of Realism*. Written by Dr. Philip Eliasoph with an introduction by John T. Spike, the book is available from SAMA or various booksellers. For information on the book, please call SAMA at (814) 472-3920.

The Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art is a community art museum founded in 1976. SAMA successfully operates the nation's longest-running museum satellite system with four museum facilities in the southwestern Pennsylvania cities of Altoona, Johnstown, Ligonier and Loretto. SAMA maintains a permanent collection of more than 4,000 works of local, regional, national and international artists. SAMA's four museums offer award-winning education programs, special events, and approximately two dozen exhibitions annually. For more information on the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art, please visit [www.sama-art.org](http://www.sama-art.org).

## **About Colleen Browning**

Colleen Browning is a significant figure in the postwar American art movement known as Magic Realism. Evolving from Surrealist trends of the 1930s and 1940s, Magic Realism emphasizes the enigmatic and the illusory. It questions the nature of reality and explores the shifting space between the seen object and the mind's perception of it. As a Magic Realist, Browning gave new currency to representational painting in an era that was largely dominated by abstract styles.

Born in Shoeburyness, at the mouth of the River Thames in Essex, England, Browning spent portions of her early life in neighboring Ireland. She showed precocious ability as an artist and with the encouragement and support of her parents, she studied at the Farnham School of Art, the Salisbury School of Arts and Crafts, and finally London's distinguished Slade School of Art. Her early inclination toward mural painting led to a position as a stage set designer, during which time she became acquainted with Surrealism. Toward the latter part of the 1940s she experimented with fantasy compositions inspired by Salvador Dali and other Surrealist leaders. She made the transition from theatrical work to easel painter toward the end of the 1940s, and in 1949 she immigrated with her new husband, novelist Geoffrey Wagner, to the United States. Early successes firmly established her American career, and for the next fifty years, Browning pursued realist painting from her studios in New York and Grenada.

At a time when Jackson Pollock and other leading American artists had abandoned realism in favor of abstract expressionism, Browning maintained the course of her personal vision of realism and illusion in her paintings. Many of her figurative works exhibit the artist's excellence in rendering human anatomy and perspective and her amazing ability to capture a fleeting moment in time.

Her work successfully marries texture and form with psychologically disconcerting compositions. "I paint different subjects, but I am always a realist, and illusionist, if you prefer," she said. "I look for technique that will most effectively present the character of the object or scene." Her paintings also reflect her interests in mystery and paradox. "I am very lucky to be an artist. I can make windows into a transformed world where the mundane becomes magical in an illuminated moment."

Throughout her illustrious career, Browning has been a teacher, mentor, and role model to artists at the Pratt Institute, the City College of New York, and the National Academy of Design. Her works are included in many private and public collections, including the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Milwaukee Art Center, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art, and the New York State Art Museum, among many others.

She has been selected to exhibit in most major invitational exhibitions at venues such as the Whitney Museum in New York, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Walker Art Gallery in Minneapolis, and the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. Her work has been featured in articles in Time, Newsweek, Glamour, the New York Times, Arts Magazine, Art International, and American Artist.

***Colleen Browning: Illustrator and Printmaker***

**SAMA-Johnstown**

**August 23 – October 6**

Like many professional artists, Browning supplemented her income through commercial illustration and printmaking. This phase of her career is highlighted in SAMA-Johnstown's exhibition, *Colleen Browning: Illustrator and Printmaker*, on view August 23 through October 6. The thirty-four works on display provide insight into this lesser-known aspect of the artist's career, casting light on her thought processes as she constructed both narrative images for a popular audience and fine art prints for connoisseurs. Particularly revealing is the contrast between the inscrutable Magic Realism of her lithographs and the breezy playfulness of her illustrations for Karen E. Lotz's children's book, *Can't Sit Still*.

Among Browning's commercial jobs were magazine advertisements for a variety of products ranging from deodorant to diamond jewelry. Her first illustrations for children's books appeared around the middle of the 1950s; over the course of the next fifteen years, Browning regularly worked on book projects that included not only children's stories, but young adult novels and the occasional literary classic (notably Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*). Although much of this activity tapered off after 1970, Browning still took on the occasional book commission, as seen in the illustrations for *Can't Sit Still*, published by Dutton in 1993.

Seeing her work in lithographic reproduction may have influenced Browning's later interest in fine art lithography, which she pursued primarily in the early 1970s. Marketed as limited-edition prints, these works share the same subjects as Browning's paintings, but are more experimental in character as the artist familiarized herself with the properties of lithographic stones, crayons, and inks. By the middle of the decade, her proficiency with the medium had grown to the point where she was able to create complex, multi-stone images such as *Union Mixer*, a special print commissioned for the United States Bicentennial celebrations.

Despite her considerable talent as an illustrator and printmaker, Browning returned almost exclusively to easel painting toward the end of her career. Her retrospective exhibitions of the 1990s suggest that she wished to be remembered only as a painter. However, as these works amply demonstrate, there is much to be appreciated in the artist's graphic work.

The Johnstown Museum will host an opening reception on Thursday, August 22. The reception, which will be held from 6 to 8 p.m., is open to the public free of charge. Reservations are requested by August 21 and can be made by calling SAMA-Johnstown at (814) 269-7234.

***Colleen Browning: The Early Years***  
**SAMA-Ligonier Valley**  
**August 24 – November 3**

On view August 24 through November 3 at SAMA-Ligonier Valley, *Colleen Browning: The Early Years* charts Browning's growth from child prodigy to professional artist with an exhibition of forty-six works. Drawings such as *Cathedral Wedding*, made when the artist was just sixteen years old, reveal unusual sophistication and imaginative powers. The artist's innate love of the whimsical and fantastic receded somewhat as she applied herself to the formal exercises of the Slade School, yet from time to time it still emerged in the boldly expressive contours of her figure studies. By the early 1940s, Browning was again giving free reign to her imagination in mural designs for both church and secular settings. *Creation*, for example, is an original interpretation of the Biblical Genesis story in which God appears as a six-armed being attended by dinosaurs.

It was perhaps only natural that Browning's love of make-believe would lead her into the performing arts. Not surprisingly, her images of film sets and theatrical scenes blur the distinction between fantasy and reality. In works such as *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, it is not clear that the subject is a stage play; yet in other theatre paintings, Browning clearly indicates the backstage action and hidden workings of the performance. This playful questioning of what is "real" clearly presages the artist's Magic Realism, and in early works such as these, she effectively laid the foundation for her American career.

The Museum will celebrate the exhibition with an opening reception from 6 to 8 p.m. on Friday, August 24. The reception is open to the public free of charge, though reservations are requested by August 20. For reservations or further information, please call SAMA-Ligonier Valley (724) 238-6015.

### ***Colleen Browning: Magic Realist***

**SAMA-Loretto**

**August 25 – October 13**

SAMA-Loretto's exhibition, *Colleen Browning: Magic Realist* focuses on the artist's paintings and includes approximately forty of Browning's master works. Select loans from private collections will round out the picture of the artist's oeuvre, making this a show not to miss. The exhibition will be on view August 25 through October 13.

After settling in New York City, Browning began to paint realistic scenes and figure studies based on the Harlem neighborhoods in which she lived. Her Surrealistic sense of the otherworldly, combined with an outsider's keen observation, resulted in a body of work that was hailed by critics as a fresh take on the urban genre. The artist won acclaim as a fast rising talent, and during the 1950s and 1960s a number of museums acquired her paintings for their permanent collections.

As Browning settled into life in America, her work diverged into two main streams. One current was prosaic, consisting mainly of images derived from the artist's frequent travels. The other was personal and idiosyncratic, representing the mature flourishing of her Magic Realist style. As exemplified by her *Umbrella*, *Mindscape*, and *Subway* series, Browning's approach to Magic Realism placed her in the same camp as Jared French, George Tooker, Robert Vickrey, and others who defined the movement for postwar critics.

The polar quality and diverse subject matter of Browning's work led later observers to conclude that the artist had lost her direction. As a result, she was largely overlooked during the last decades of her life. However, with her passing and subsequent reevaluation of her oeuvre, Browning's importance is becoming clear. As art historians realize that the dialogue between realism and abstraction was more extensive than has previously been assumed, Browning emerges as one of its more compelling voices.

SAMA-Loretto will celebrate its exhibition at an opening reception from 6 to 9 p.m. on August 25. The program will include cocktails, dinner and a presentation by Dr. Philip Eliasoph, author of the Museum's new book, *Colleen Browning: The Enchantment of Realism*. Cost for the reception is \$50 per person. Reservations are required by August 22 and can be made by calling the Loretto Museum at (814) 472-3920.

### ***Colleen Browning: Drawings***

**SAMA-Altoona**

**August 27 – January 12**

In Browning's paintings, the human figure typically plays a central role. The mastery of anatomy and physiognomy was a traditional element of formal art training, and from her student days onward, Browning honed her skills by drawing from the live model. The forty-eight works on display in SAMA-Altoona's *Colleen Browning: Drawings* reveal not only the artist's proficiency as a delineator of the human form, but also her dedication to her craft. The exhibition will be on view August 27 through January 12.

Many of these drawings were taken from sketchbooks that Browning filled relatively late in her career, probably during the 1980s. Freely brushed with ink and in some cases worked up with colored chalk, they were most likely completed within five or ten minutes each. A staple of academic practice, the "five-minute pose" is designed to help the artist focus immediately on the model's most salient features and vital gestures. Thus the artist addressed the figure as a whole, rather than becoming bogged

down in surface details or the rendering of individual body parts. Although less highly finished, the resulting drawing is more compelling and “alive” as a result.

The compelling quality of Browning’s figures is a central element of the artist’s Magic Realist style. Carefully studied, they are fully believable as real human beings; at the same time, they are shrouded in the self-contained mystery that is a hallmark of Magic Realism. These drawings reveal the care and dedication that went into Browning’s seemingly effortless performance, and heighten our appreciation for her remarkable body of work.

SAMA-Altoona will celebrate the exhibition at a special *Blue Monday* program on August 27. The event will include light supper and libations, as well as bluegrass music provided by Tom McCarty & Friends. Cost is \$20 per person. Please call SAMA-Altoona at (814) 946-4464 for reservations.