

JOE BRAINARD: LOVE NANCY

MARCH 27 – JUNE 28, 2025



Joe Brainard (1942–94)

Untitled ("The Avant Garde"), 1984

Maquette for the cover of *ARTnews* Annual #34

Ink and pencil on paper, cut and pasted on printed paper, stapled to board, 12 x 19 inches

NEW YORK – Craig Starr Gallery is pleased to announce *Joe Brainard: Love Nancy*, on view from March 27 through June 28, 2025.

Ernie Bushmiller's 1930s popular cartoon character Nancy is one of the central motifs of Joe Brainard's work. Brainard first used the character in 1963 and continued until his retirement from art in 1978, producing over 100 works in various media. *Joe Brainard: Love Nancy* brings together a large selection of drawings and collages from this body of work for the first time in almost 20 years, including loans from the Colby College Museum of Art and the Fogg Museum at Harvard University.

Born in Arkansas in 1942 and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Brainard moved to New York City in late 1960. A writer and an artist, he became associated with the New York School, an informal group of artists and poets that included Joseph LeSueur, Frank O'Hara, Alex Katz, Larry Rivers,

Fairfield Porter, John Ashbery, and others. In New York, Brainard also became interested in Pop Art and their use of comics as a poetic medium. In the words of his lifelong friend, the poet and essayist Ron Padgett:

Joe began using Pop elements in his visual artworks soon after his arrival in New York in late 1960—images of consumer goods such as Fab, Tide, Alka-Seltzer, Lucky Strikes, and 7-Up—and in 1963 he began including comic strip characters such as L’il Abner, Dick Tracy, and Nancy, whose adventures he was following in the *New York Post*. Nancy quickly emerged as his clear favorite, culminating in the “If Nancy was...” series of 1972 and the large *Nancy Diptych* of 1974.¹

The original character of Nancy first appeared in the comic strip *Fritzi Ritz*, “a stereotypical flapper strip that capitalized on the excitement of the Roaring Twenties and the emancipation of American women... *Fritzi Ritz* related the story of a New York glamour girl turned movie actress.”² Published by the *New York Evening World*, the strip was written and drawn since 1933 by Ernie Bushmiller, the son of a German immigrant and a student at the National Academy of Design. In one episode, Fritzi travels to Hollywood and is joined there by her niece, Nancy, who less than a year later becomes the focus of the daily strip. Bushmiller’s earlier drawings for *Fritzi* highlighted the elegance of the actress’s marvelous outfits, including lingerie, coats, hats, and detailed dresses. In contrast, his style for Nancy became increasingly linear and economical, emphasizing the cheerful buoyancy and ingenuity of her simpler world.

In the words of Padgett, pictures such as *Untitled (Nancy Leaning on a Table)*, on view in this exhibition, follow “Bushmiller’s clean, bold line and his disposition of solid blacks against white,” as well as Nancy’s “simplicity of manner... her direct, courteous demeanor.”³ This drawing shows Brainard’s beloved heroine donning her classic schoolgirl uniform—a jumper, collared shirt, and pleated skirt. Brainard enjoyed identifying with Bushmiller’s Nancy, making her a quiet expression of his own attitudes and desires—and he returned several times to this modest composition as the best receptacle for his sentimental projections, including two other smaller works on paper, also in the show, and his large 1974 painting *Nancy Diptych* (Private collection).

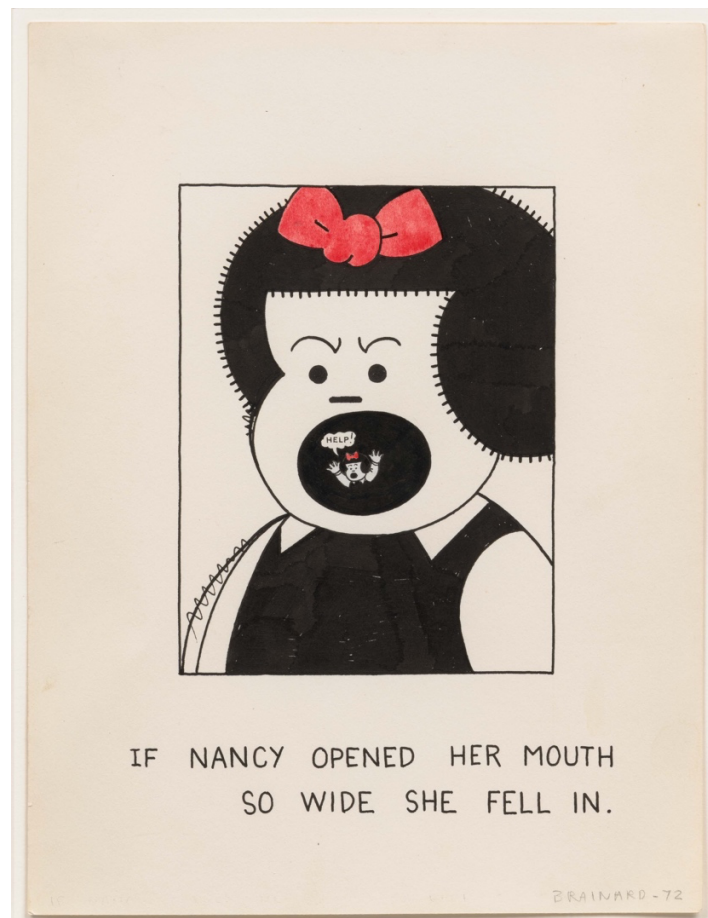
In 1972, Brainard began a series of works casting Nancy in a variety of surprising roles: as a face on Mount Rushmore, an ashtray, or a de Kooning “Woman” painting. Like in his famous memoir *I Remember*, these works are composed around a discreet sentence beginning with “If Nancy Was...”, and which decrees the model or situation that she needs to play. Some pictures simply lay out an experience or perception, both startling and hilarious.

¹ Padgett, Ron, “The Origins of Joe Brainard’s Nancy,” in *The Nancy Book* (Los Angeles: Siglio Press, 2008), p. 28.

² Walker, Brian, *The Best of Ernie Bushmiller’s Nancy* (Wilton, Connecticut: Comicana Books, 1988), p. 17.

³ Ron Padgett, “The Origins of Joe Brainard’s Nancy,” pp. 29-30.

In *If Nancy Opened Her Mouth So Wide She Fell In*, on view in the exhibition, Nancy is shown asking for help as she falls into her own mouth, both the attacker and the victim—an uncanny double in a Freudian slip. Nancy also allowed Brainard to explore art history and appears garbed in the style of Leonardo, Picasso, or de Kooning, confounding and upsetting in an ironic way different modes of pictorial representation.



Joe Brainard (1941-1994)
If Nancy Opened Her Mouth So Wide She Fell In, 1972
Gouache and ink on paper, 12 x 9 inches

A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition and includes a new essay by Hilton Als, an award-winning journalist, critic, and curator. Als has been a staff writer at the *New Yorker* since 1994 and has received numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism (2017), Yale's Windham-Campbell Literature Prize (2016), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2000). He is currently a teaching professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

About Craig Starr Gallery

Craig Starr Gallery is located at 5 East 73rd Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Gallery hours are Monday through Saturday, 11am–5:30 pm, and by appointment. For general information, please visit the gallery's website at www.craigstarr.com.