

**John Brown**  
**by Gary Blundell**

I'm not exactly sure when I first met John Brown. I may have had an opportunity to visit a studio of his in the mid 1990s when I was looking for my own place to paint. I suspect though that I first met him at the Olga Korper Gallery at an art opening other than his own. Those are both likely because, in my opinion he was one of the most supportive artists of other artists and their struggle that I ever met. He was not competitive. He loved to get to know other artists and, unlike many other artists, he loved to hear about what they thought about the pieces that he was working on.

One of the first times that he asked me to visit him at his 401 Richmond Street studio he asked me straight out to offer some opinions on what he was doing. I was so hesitant. "He is so good why could he care less about what I think?", I thought. But he really did. And he made me feel so comfortable that I felt calm in actually telling him and he was never ever insulted by anything that I had to say. He really needed to know. It helped him and I was glad to help.

You have to understand, before I continue, and I apologize for the sports analogy here, but I am the kind of guy that believes that if you want to get better at your game, you have to play with persons who are better than you. And when I first saw John's paintings I was blown away. Here was an artist whose work was so good just being near one of the pieces was going to make me better, simply through exposure to them, through osmosis.

I was also someone who was "self taught" as an artist, although I do hate the expression. I have a degree in Geological Engineering. My mother painted and I took it up that way but I have no art degrees. It was just something that I decided that I would rather do anything else. I loved all of the beautiful and complicated patterns in rock, wished to express that somehow and I had to seek out great artists to help me do that. And all of us painters know that John was the best. Let's be honest here. That was why the crowd at his opening reception at the MOCCA show was about 50% painters. We all saw each other there.

As a working artist not trained in art institutions, I have never had the right language to describe what I saw when I first saw John's work. As such this essay is likely lacking. I think though that my brain immediately forced my mouth to utter the word "wow". I just stood there riveted in front of one of those big amazing pieces, all those earthy reds and pinks and flat greens, part of the surface scraped back down to the gesso and I thought, "Well. I am going to have to get to know this guy."

But that manoeuver could be tricky. Artists are a funny bunch. You know, we can be sensitive or difficult or prickly. But John was never ever one of those things. He was as challenging as his work could be and he had lots of opinions but he was always kind and funny and supportive and caring. And who knew that he loved music and literature as much as I did. That was a bonus. And so every time that I came to Toronto I found myself in his studio, listening to great tunes, talking about art and politics and laughing.

His death has left a void not just in my life but in the world of Canadian art. It is so sad that I will never ever sit in that studio looking at those great works in progress again. And I can only hope that those at the controls of the major art institutions in Canada have the good sense to organize a retrospective of his work. In my opinion, there is no other Canadian artist living or deceased who deserves one more. He was the best.

October 2020