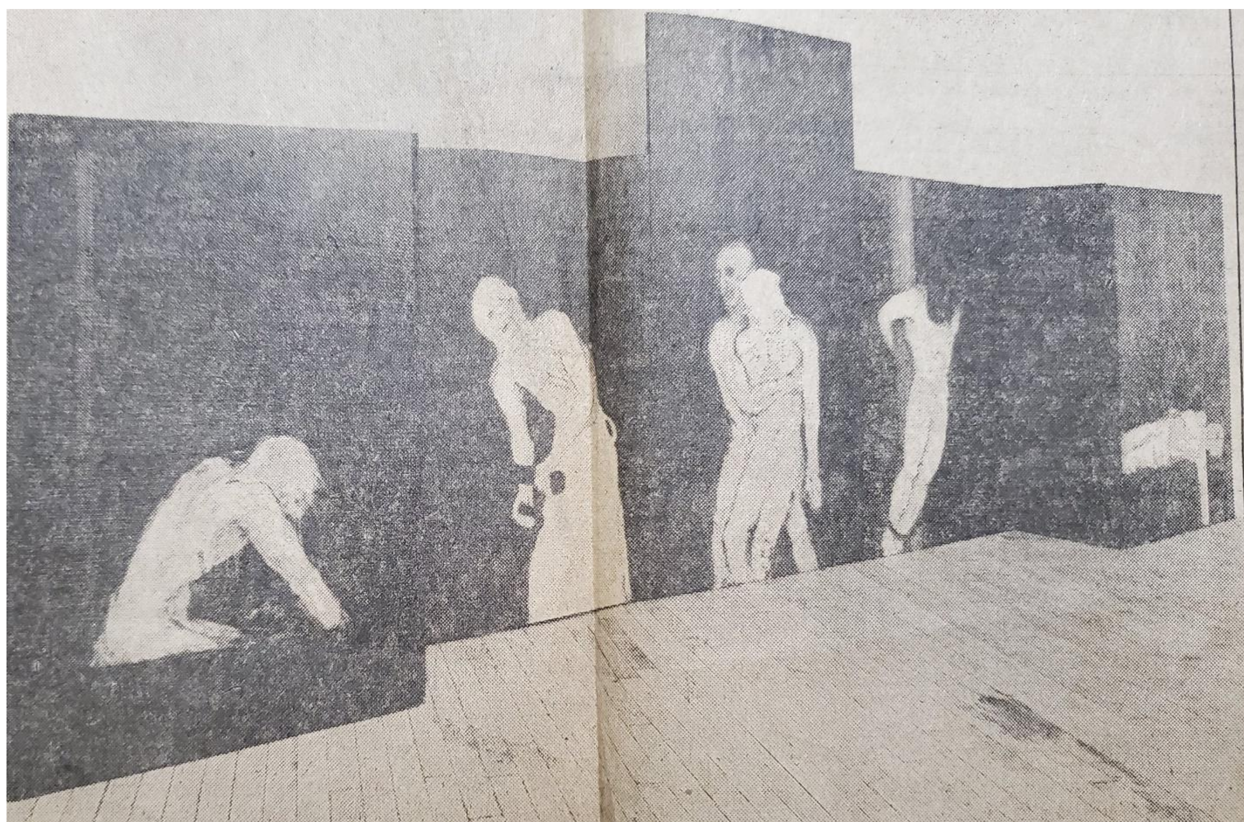
Ground and Figure: Landscape and Bodies in the Early Drawings of John Brown

Brown first came to prominence as a painter in the early 1980s in shows at Chromazone and then the Carmen Lamanna Gallery. In form if not in content and appearance, his early paintings (*Figures in a Garden*, *The Mocking of Christ*) displayed the influence of Pre-Renaissance Italian painting.



Figures In a Garden (1983)

They were constructed as large-scale series of individual panels arranged together as an altar piece would have been. While the Christian imagery elicited some remarks at the time, most of the focus was drawn to the haunted and haunting figures that dominated the paintings.[1] From the beginning, Brown was known as a figurative painter, a painter of the mortal, vulnerable,

suffering, human body. While Brown would eventually free his work from its attachment to Christian themes and the overt references to Bacon and Goya, the problem of how to most evocatively represent the material relationships between body and its world would remain.

Brown would go on to become one of the country's leading painters of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[2] However, in his formative period, roughly 1980-1986, drawing occupied a central place in his practice. Some major drawings appeared in important Toronto art publications (*C Magazine* and *Impulse*), some were exhibited (*Studies for a Place to Stand*), but many were minor works and studies.

Unititled,, *Impulse Magazine*, Winter, 1982

C Magazine, Summer, 1984

The later have some academic and historical interest as records of the development of Brown's main themes and techniques, but I will also argue here that they have as much (and in some cases more) sensuously compelling power as the early paintings and major drawings. Part of that

sensuously compelling aesthetic power, I will further argue, owes to what I will call their embodying an “aesthetic of absence.” This aesthetic of absence connects these works to an important element of modernist architecture, literature, and music, but in Brown’s case it is also informed, I believe, by the charred landscape, menacing industrial architecture, and working bodies of 1960’s Sudbury, Ontario, where Brown spent his childhood and adolescence.

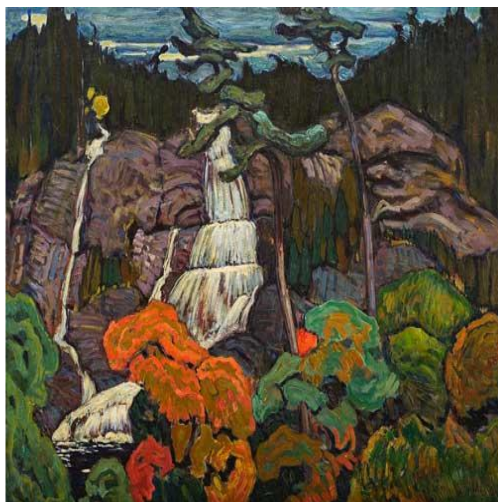
Those who know his early work might not find this claim surprising. Brown made no secret of the influence that the industrial landscape of Sudbury exercized on his development. He titled one series “Something that Happened in Sudbury” and the sculpture that was the centrepiece of “Study for a Place to Stand” was modelled on the “cage” that takes miners underground. However, what I am after here is something more and deeper than the explicit references he made in his early work to the hometown of his youth. While I do not want to overstate the case and claim that the structure and appearance of these early works are mechanical reproductions from his memory, I do want to say that the landscape, industrial architecture, and working bodies shaped his understanding of what is worthy of artistic representation. More precisely, I will argue that his artistic practice was shaped by a sensibility, formed over a long period of experience, that sought out the power, indeed, the beauty, of that which, from a picturesque or naturalist-romantic point of view, is ruined, broken, damaged, and ugly. Brown’s early drawings are figurative representations of the natural and human world stripped bare of all sentimental and picturesque qualities. Colour, detailed topography, flora, fauna, genitals, faces, all are stripped away. We are left to confront ourselves and our world at its most basic: shapes, solidity, musculature, gesture, and the struggle to connect to each other.[3]

I will develop my argument in three steps. In the first, I will explore the role of the natural and industrial landscape of Sudbury. I will maintain that Brown’s sensibility counters the

cliches that dominate tourists' images of Northern Ontario. In the second, I will argue that there is a parallel process at work in his representation of the human body in the early drawings. Brown boils the body down to muscle and movement: the body as suffering worker devoid of individuating traits, condemned to struggle in and against an indifferent world of places, buildings, and physically proximate but spiritually distant others. In the final section, I will bring ground and figure together through the claim that these early drawings should be understood as an instance of a more general "aesthetics of absence" that also runs through modernist architecture, literature, and music. The aesthetics of absence abandons decoration and adornment and instead asks: what is the bare minimum required to engage the sensibility and intellect of the viewer, the reader, the listener?

1.: Charred Land, Imprisoning Structure

The Group of Seven made the artistic representation of Northern Ontario as rugged, colourful, and devoid of people iconic. It is true that the landscape is rugged and "Rainbow Country" between Sudbury and Manitoulin Island or the Agawa Canyon further west is colourful in the Fall. The brochure imagery is of pristine wilderness devoid of people saving the consuming gaze of Southern and American tourists.



J.E.H. MacDonald, *Algoma Waterfall*

But people live there, and have been there for thousands of years. While the impact of Indigenous people on the environment was low compared to the industrialized extraction industries of the twentieth century, they too had to work on the land in order to survive. Wherever there are human beings, there must be work. As David Harvey and Steven Vogel have argued, the idea of "untouched wilderness" is a fantasy of urban environmentalists.[4] Human beings change the world through the most basic processes required for them to live in it.

Open Ore Roasting Beds, Coniston ON, in the 1920s.

A start to understanding Brown's early drawings can be made by thinking of them as the opposite of the Group of Seven's picturesque landscapes. Whereas their North is devoid of people, Brown's North is devoid of lakes and trees, indeed, devoid of colour. It exists as undifferentiated shape drawn in quickly with black grease pencil, a basis hardly worth noticing in its own right, a mere support for the human dramas that will play out on it. This is the landscape of the people who live in Northern mining towns and cities. They are not out marvelling at the craggy jack pine that Torontonians want to save from the loggers' chain saw. Their lives depend on wielding the saw, blasting the rock, mucking out the ore from the stope, and smelting it.

Garson Mine No. 1 ('Old Mine'), immediately behind Brown's Garson, ON home

Photograph, Joseph Brown

The Group of Seven perpetuate the myth of the landscape as timelessly *given;* Brown's early drawings show it to be something *produced.*

Untitled, Circa 1982, Grease Pencil on Paper

Brown portrays that which tourist-minded civic leaders have tried to (for the most part, successfully) erase and hide: the consequences of the large-scale conversion of rock to ore to metal. Sudbury in the 1960's was famously compared to the moon, and it was not a complement. If you go today, you will not see any traces of that moonscape. Decades of restoration efforts have covered the scorched rocks with grass and birch and poplar forests have re-grown. But what you are seeing is no more "natural" than the blackened rocks you would have seen in the early 1960's when Brown was growing up in Garson, just north of Sudbury. Yesterday's sulphur-burned rock and today's thin-trunked birch and poplar forests are equally the result of conscious human intervention. The former created the conditions which the later have remediated.

Brown's early drawings thus testify to the worked reality of nature by posing an aesthetic challenge to accept the scarified industrial landscape as it is. Neil Armstrong's first words on the moon will always be remembered, but Buzz Aldrin's were far more poetically evocative: "desolation, magnificent desolation."[5] Brown's early drawings are not landscapes, but they do evoke a sense of magnificent desolation of embodied human life having to work and struggle in an environment that provides no reason for being, that does not "give colour to the void," (Camus) that cannot provide any pretty distraction from the hard business of living because it is ugly.[6]

Study for Portrait of 2 People Working Towards a Decision (1984)

But its ugliness is not to be papered over: honesty demands that its existence be registered. The drawings do just that: register the existence of the land that is there. It does not need to be worked over, elevated, refined, or oohed and aahed over. It simply needs to be acknowledged for what it is: the basis upon which we work, struggle, and survive. The simple lines of his grease pencil provide all the visual testimony that is required.

Study for Mocking of Christ (1982)

Brown does not try to illustrate the details of the land. It is typically portrayed as an undifferentiated black strip running the length of the bottom fifth or so of the paper. But that is

enough to communicate what it is in relation to human beings: framework and support for our lives.

Study for a Place to Stand (2) (1983-84)

Adding detail would detract from the honesty of the drawing: when you are working and struggling to survive, the appearance of your environment is irrelevant. "The care burdened man in need," Marx says, "has no sense for the finest play."[7] There is no need to pay attention to the details, Brown's work suggests, because they do not change anything of ultimate importance. You are, here and now, standing on this ground, and you have to work out how to still be here a minute later. Whether there are trees or not, whether their leaves are crimson or green or brown or not, whether there is a blue lake set against the background of pink granite or not, the existential starkness of our ultimate alone-ness does not change.

What does not change is the need to work. The human world is the product of work that transforms the natural and imposes human structure on it. In Brown's early drawings these structures, like the ground upon which his figures stand, is devoid of detail and decoration. Often surrounded by wire they could be factories or internment camps or both. They do not require definite penal referent to convey a sense of confinement, a sense that their occupants having been sent their against their will.

A Man Tilting a Cross (1983)

Here too I think we can detect the influence of Brown's experience of the industrial architecture of the mines and mills of Garson and the Sudbury region.

It would have been impossible for Brown to ignore that architecture. His first home was an apartment behind the bank that his father managed. Immediately to the rear of that bank was the original Garson Mine (everyone knew it as the "Old Mine).

Garson Mine No. 1 ('Old Mine')

Next to the Old Mine was the headframe of the new (still functioning) Garson mine. It dominated the skyline of the town. These structures and others like them are not Art Deco masterpieces like the Hoover Dam, not airy Le Corbusier factories or elegant Albert Khan structures. They are solid and unadorned like the rock they were built to mine: brown brick, grey aluminum cladding, built to last and withstand the cold but not to be looked at and appreciated for their own sake. They enclose space and organize the dangerous work of the people who spend a third of their lives inside. They loom, always buzzing with the hum of high voltage wires; at night they glow from within, suggesting activity but not disclosing exactly what it is.

As with his depiction of the landscape, there is total lack of romanticization of structure and architecture. There is nothing noble or ignoble about the structures: they are just there, enclosing space and entrapping people; they organize activity and extract effort. In so doing, they suggest that this sort of confinement of activity is both inevitable and destructive of the spirit of creative freedom. If we feel the people are prisoners, it is because they are. But they have not been sentenced by a judge or military tribunal but by necessity: work is what people

have to do. They work, they suffer, but they have to keep on working, as a song by Brown's band Wrongrong.[8]

These early drawings shift our attention from form to function. Nether the land nor structures are there to be admired, they are there to elicit effort from us.

Untitled, Circa 1982

They are the basis and framework of an activity which seems as exhausting as it does endless. The human predicament cannot be overcome no matter how much we work. The world does not become more beautiful by our efforts; nothing changes from day to day on this hard featureless

ground and these cold square walls. Human life contains an irreducible element of violence.

Untitled Illustration in Impulse Magazine, Winter, 1982.[9]

Yet, the honesty of Brown's absolute refusal to try to prettify his scenes dignifies the struggle even if it cannot bring freedom to people. And in that honesty lies the continuing power of the

drawings and their aesthetic value. But to fully understand that claim we have to now turn our attention to the figures at the centre of the drawings.

2. Labouring Bodies: Work, Threat, Conflict

John Bentley Mays, Brown's first and lasting critical champion, argued in the catalogue that accompanied his retrospective at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Art that his work "stunk of the body."[10] He was thinking for the most part of Brown's mature paintings, but the comment is perhaps even more true of these early drawings (some of which Mays would certainly have seen). Brown would later say that the building up-scraping off paint technique for which he became bets known was a form of drawing.[11] That practice allowed him to create paintings of extraordinary complexity. These early drawings, traditionally composed with grease pencil, are, from one perspective, the opposite.[12] Whereas the post-2000 paintings are fractal-like in their complexity, these are as simple as can be: ground and figure, shape and shade. On the other hand, thematically, they are the starting point for Brown's career long concern with problems of representing and understanding our embodied predicament.

Figure in a Room: *After Goya*, 1984

Like the landscape and structures, the figures of these early drawings are almost always devoid of individuating marks. They lack faces, genitals, clothing. They are bodies stripped to the barest of essentials: head, torso, limbs. If there are two figures, they are almost always wrestling or struggling.

Athletes, 1984

There is no tenderness, no love.[13] They all have their crosses to bear.

Man Lifting a Cross (1982)

Brown was a playful person with a wicked sense of humour, but there is nothing funny about the depiction of his subjects. They portray lives whose choices are as stark as the contrast between the white paper and the black grease pencil: Work! Suffer! Die.

The absence of defined facial is the most striking feature of these works, especially given the importance of heads and faces in his maturing work.

Study for Something that Happened in Sudbury, 1983-84.

Perhaps the absence of faces signifies a youthful struggle with identity or a desire to escape being identified. I will not explore the psychological possibilities any further, because ultimately the "why" only matters at the time of execution: once a work has been completed and enters into the world the reasons why the artist made this or that choice are no longer essential. What matters is whether and to what extent it can move and speak to others who were not present at its conception and for whom the artist's motives will always be opaque. Whatever Brown's early motivations, the absence of faces has great expressive power. It emphasises the universality of

the predicament within which his subjects are trapped: everyone has to wrestle with their mortality and find a way to get along.

The existential dimension to Brown's de-individuating portrayals of his figures seems inescapable. However, I also think that here too we can see the influence of his early experiences. When he was growing up Garson was a socio-economically and ethnically uniform space. It was overwhelmingly white and working class: people lived in the same sort of houses, ate the same sort of food, laughed at the same sort of jokes, faced the same sort of economic pressures, got the same cancers and had the same heart attacks. Every payday there would be lines of men outside the bank waiting to cash their cheque before heading to the Royale Hotel to drink a chuck of it away. Like the buildings where they worked, these were unremarkable people. But they were still people: Brown pulls them out of the mass only to the extent that they all have bodies. They stand on their own two feet, all alike in some respects, but all facing the challenges that the world poses on their own. If they are all alike, they are all alike as individuals.

These drawings have lost none of their existential-emotional intensity over the past 40 years. However, they do certainly speak the language of a young man who is feeling the dangers and possibilities of life with full intensity. With experience comes more subtle evaluations of life's challenges. Life is never as good or as bad as it feels when we are young. It is not all black and white, struggle and suffering. Human beings are capable of wide ranges of emotions. Different people react differently to the same problem. They *face* the world. Later, Brown would turn his attention to the problem of representing the human face. His "Human Heads" series (started in 1988) are a turn towards colour and complexity, a recognition that life marks us in different ways, individuates us in ways that enrich our lives. But to mature one must first be

young and stake one's claim with raw feeling. What the early drawings lack in detail they make up for with honest expression of fear that thinking about our mortality and existential aloneness generates.

Like his landscape, whose function is to support us, and the architecture of work, whose function is to enclose and monitor us, Brown's bodies are lives stripped to the bone. Naked muscles in motion, they betray nothing about the person that the body bears.

Study for a Place to Stand,(4) 1983-84

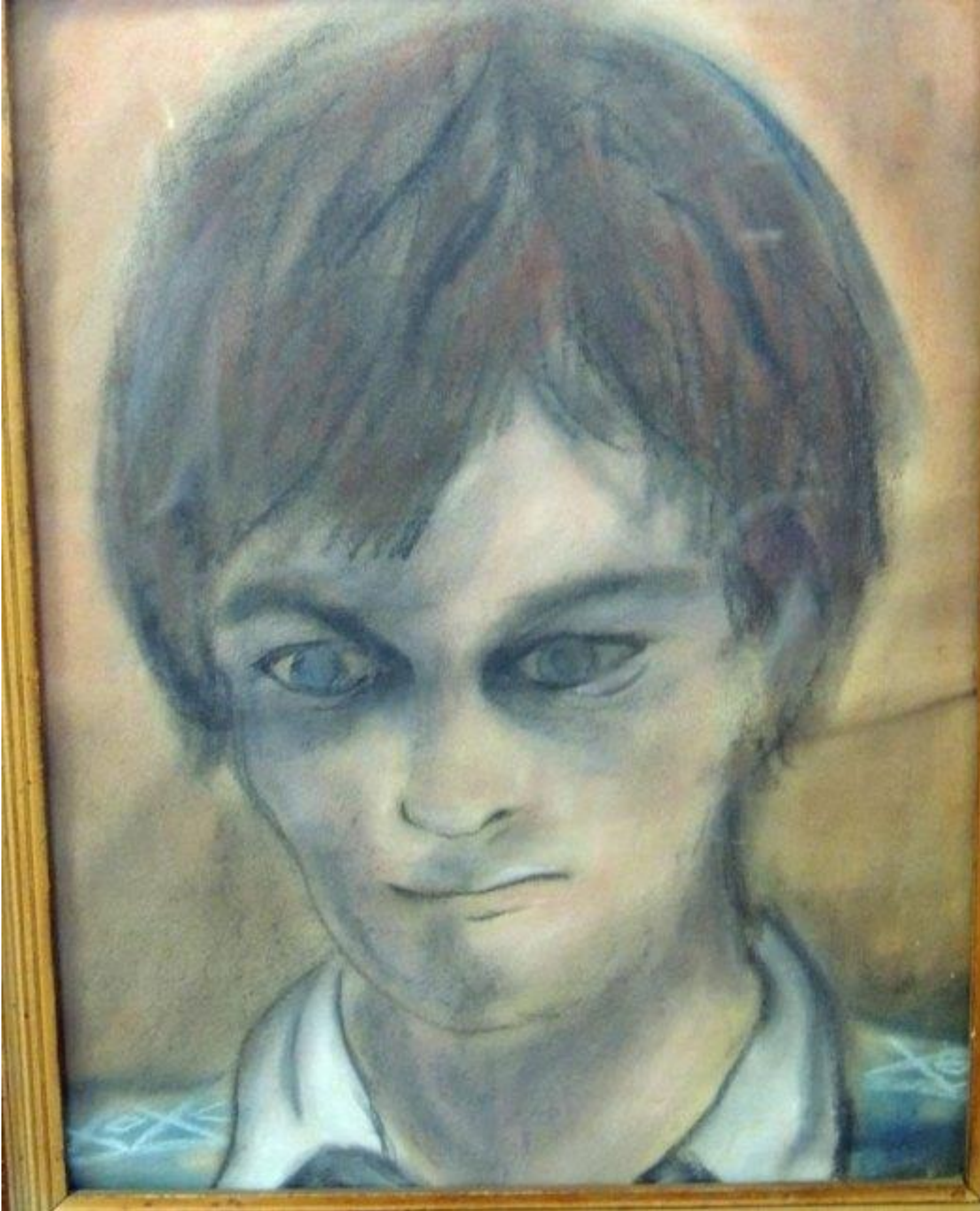
Instead, they reduce the person to the body while abstracting from anything that would redeem the body as an object of desire or a source of joy. They are neither beautiful nor ugly. They are mostly space, almost not even there, transparent, with no secrets, but also solid and strong, to withstand, for a time, the rigors of living.

3. The Aesthetics of Absence

It is not difficult to understand why Brown's early work was called "expressionist." While there are no obvious references to the German Expressionists of the interwar years (Dix, Grosz), Brown's works are clearly charged with an emotional intensity which gives them the appearance of being the realization of a deep need to get his feelings about the world out.

Untitled, circa 1984

As I noted above, they are clearly the works of a young person. However, if one compares them to the naïve portraits he was painting prior to going to the Ontario College of Art, they appear remarkably mature and thoughtfully composed.



Portrait of Joseph Brown, circa 1975

He quickly abandoned the attempt to illustrate people in favour of a simplified practice that stripped down the content of his drawings and paintings to the bare essentials of line and gesture.

This stripping down is an instance, I suggest, of what I am calling the "aesthetics of absence." Brown always rejected any suggestion that he was an abstract painter and he was not

a fan of abstract expressionism, but there is a sense in which these early works rely on abstraction as this is explained by Robert Motherwell. Motherwell draws on his background as a philosophy student to explain that abstraction is a process of focussing in rather than any particular style.[14] To abstract is to select and concentrate upon one aspect of a more complex whole. How far the abstraction goes is up to the person deciding upon what aspect of the complex whole to focus. Brown's work depends upon this sort of abstraction and it connects it to a wider modernist war against decoration.

Brown was a fan of van der Rohe, Beckett (calling a series of later paintings "Ping" after the Beckett short story series), and Satie, all figures who created by simplifying. He was also influenced early on by Edward Muybridge's time-motion studies.[15] Van der Rohe and other modernist architects rejected ornamentation in favour of a simple, elegant geometry that spoke for itself. Beckett cleansed his language of metaphor and illustrative description and Satie eliminated dramatic narrative from his compositions. All three are paradigm instances of art boiled down to the basics: clean, functional structures, unadorned reporting of events and thoughts, the distribution of pitch in time. Brown practices an analogous stripping down in his early works.

Clearly, Brown had things to say that he could not say in the conventional language of portraiture. These early drawings are the result of him filtering his early experiences of the land and people of the Sudbury region through the more sophisticated art historical understanding that he developed at OCA (now UOCAD). The influence of Goya and Bacon is obvious, but the role that the sedimented experience of the austere landscape and working bodies of his childhood and adolescence is not so obvious, especially to critics who would not have shared that experience. They also did not make the connection to the aesthetics of absence (under that name or any

other). They picked up on the expressive power and the obvious art historical references, but I think that the intensity and power of these pieces cannot be fully understood by focussing on what is there. We also need to focus on what is not there: detailed individuating facial expressions and the riot of forms of living nature.

In the period immediately preceding the drawings that I am discussing, Brown did represent faces and genders. The figures were bulbous and grotesque and their faces often obscured by masks.

You Get Out of Life What You Put Into It, 1981

Again, a certain anxiety about his own (sexual) identity seems clear enough. But a year or so later the faces, masked or not, were gone, replaced by smeared out features: masking by unmasking. Brown seems to recognise, in line with wider modernist traditions, that the audience can be trusted to read the scene, they do not need to be told everything. Brown once told a friend and fellow artist that he did not want to make easy paintings.[16] "Easy" paintings, or

easy art in general, could be defined as any art that tells us what we are supposed to think about it. The earnest pedantry of much contemporary art, eager to let everyone know about the political *bona fides* of the artist, is a case in point. Brown eliminates all overt commentary on the world and allows the simple ground and figures say what they have to say. Simplifying his practice allowed his drawings to speak more loudly, because they are left open to being read by audiences whom he trusts to figure things out on their own term, in their own way, in light of their own experience. Everything does not need to be spelled out in slogans and platitudes.

At the same time, these drawings did have (and still do) something to say. Brown's work is "expressionist" in that it rejected all abstract "art for art's sake" academicization, irony, and self-referentiality. His early works are searching for the final point of contact between the real and its aesthetic transfiguration, the point where everything is still recognizable, but altered by the artist's hand. Smearing out the details is the space the viewer needs to interact with them, not as a student being instructed by a teacher, but as a co-participant in the most fundamental predicaments of life. Brown was deeply and widely read, but he was a maker, not an intellectual. The profundity of his work is a function of what they look like. But what they look like puts them in contact with the deepest problems of religion and philosophy (which are just different avenues into the deepest problems of life, as Hegel reminds us).

Human life is historical but the problems that wake us up at night in a cold sweat have a timeless quality to them. I do not mean that they are felt or understood exactly the same way in all places and times. Rather, I mean that when we are seized by the thought of our mortality, or wrestle with the problem of how to express our love or fear or desire, we feel as though we are standing outside of time. These early drawings also have that character. They are spatially determined but everything and everyone seems frozen (even the wrestling figures seem stuck in a

pose and not moving. The figures who imitate Christ do not point us towards a redeemed future; they are weighed down by the cross they must bear in the present. In their ears rings only the silence of the universe that Pascal too heard when he asked the question why.[17]

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[1]See John Bentley Mays, "Monumenta: Promising but Haunted," *Globe and Mail,* Saturday, Sept. 11th, 1982, and Matthew Fraser, "Artists' Religion Inspires Dark Visions of the World," *Globe and Mail,* July 25, 1983).

[2] See David Liss, "The Visceral THING," *John Brown,* Toronto: Canadian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2009, pp.45-85.

[3] In his earliest professional work, from 1980-81, women as well as genitalia were represented, but both disappeared thereafter.

Untitled, circa 1980-81

[4] See Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016, and David Harvey, "The Nature of Environment," *Ways of the World,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp.159-213.

[5] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/160418-buzz-aldrin-ufo-apollo-crew-moon-mars-space-ngbooktalk (accessed, April 28,2021).

[6] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* New York: Vintage Books, 1955, p.84.

[7] Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works, Vol.3,* New York: International Publishers, 1975, p. 302

[8] "Suffer," lyrics by Marc DeGuerre,

[9] This drawing shows the early influence of Sidney Nolan on Brown, in particular his "Ned Kelly" Paintings, in which the famous Australian outlaw's head is always concealed behind a

black block. In Brown's usage the blaock seems to indicate that while violence is always caused by individuals, there is nothing "personal" about it: violence stems from our being human, not any peculiarities of our personality, which are literally "blocked out."

[10] John Bentley Mays, "Answers, a fiction," *John Brown,* Toronto: Canadian centre for Contemporary Art, 2009, p.13.

[11] Dault, Gary Michael, "Erasing For Me is Really a Form of Drawing, Globe and Mail, Feb. 23rd, 2008 https://www.johnbrownarchive.ca/wp-admin/Criticism/dault-erasing.pdf

[12] Although, as his long time friend, painter, and documentary film maker Marc De Guerre astutely notes, the rubbing out of the faces was an early version of what would become his mature scrapping technique. (Personal communication).

[13] There are 4 exceptions, Judas 1 and 2 and Two Figures Kissing portray two figures embracing and kissing.

Figures Kissing, 1982

[14] Robert Motherwell, "The Humanism of Abstraction," *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p.250.

[15] As De Guerre noted in a personal communication, the wires in the background of many of these drawings were influenced on the one hand by photos of concentration camps and on the other by Muybridge's photos. Connecting both is (perhaps) a sense of the violence of all forms of objectification of human beings.

[16] Margaux Smith, private communication.

[17] Blaise Pascal, *Selections from The Thoughts*, New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1965, p.64.