

John Brown

“Thing”



The show is comprised of four large works (between 5'x5' and 7'x7'), titled "Thing", "Nothing", "Anything" and "Something", and ten smaller works (20"x20") a part of his Grimm series.

This was the first commercial show that I had a definite link to. Two of the four large paintings I actually took part in making. The smaller works are separately titled, although I would venture to say, they are a parallel series to the larger works. In that they come to be in the same manner and timeframe. They are all worked on concurrently and definitely leak imagery back and forth. That is to say that as each one furthers itself, it helps John to dictate activities in the others, as not to reproduce or repeat visual influence. I would even go as far as saying that the title "Grimm" and it's reference to Samuel Beckett's fairy tales is merely an ideal that John Brown has explored due to their uniqueness and diversity. Their non-illustrative titles allude to this and simply allow the same latitude within his work, not to mention the fact that there are 209 of them to reference.

John himself contests that his paintings are not abstract, only now after seeing how they are created would I agree. Everything in popular culture is fuel for his work. Whether it is a photograph in the newspaper, a song or even something he has read recently. It all gets processed and finds it's way into his work. Then it would usually be painted over, often saying, "I like this part, but it's not going to stay this way". This is where I came in. The "Thing's" series were a large amalgam of visual influences layered on four large wood panels. John asked me to help him scratch them down.

Now I should say that John had been working this way for some time. This subtractive way of working is his way of "fixing" his paintings. I think he sometimes paints something simply to remove it. His subtractive technique, up until this point, consisted of broad scrapes with his paint scraper. This newer variation on upon his archeological approach involved scratching with only the corner of his scraper. The amount of surface area that needed to be reduced this way would have taken one-person months to achieve and a good portion of their sanity.

So together we started on “Thing”, which it was later aptly called, with one-inch scratches. It would take about fifty of them to cover one square inch. John was unsure about exactly what would happen, but that is what made it all the more interesting of a process. We thought that this process would be quite evident in the final product, with possibly a ragged appearance. Yet it was the opposite that was happening. As we worked through the surface area uncovering the vestiges of his underlying efforts it appeared to be softening all the layers at once. The different paints and layers would react differently when scratched and each of their characteristics uniquely appeared. It acted wonderfully as both, a diffusing mechanism as well as a unifier of all the layers. I think this was the most powerful part of the whole experience. To watch and be a part of this “Thing” that grew, changed, edited, layered and finally reduced with an unproven process that in turn revealed all of the efforts and vestiges of what was edited out revealing them all in a kind of perpendicular cross section of a painting and it’s inner workings.

John Brown’s influences are quite varied. As Jane Young wrote of him “When Brown evokes the work of other painters, the echoes are formal and fleeting, used as much to undermine them as to summon them”. References to Bacon and Richter works are obvious but even more immediate yet not as evident would be Luc Tymuns and an infatuation with outsider art. Probably the most influential element in his whole process would be his music collection, which in a lot of ways steers his activities or at least sets their tone.

These recent works are probably a conservators nightmare, as they are so reduced there is very little left to conserve. Although he has accomplished in a painting what so many conservators would toil to find, a transparency into process. To dissect and discover how and perhaps why certain changes were made and to categorize and catalogue the elements and technique that were used.

I think one way to describe John Brown is that he painted his visual references, his influences and his outlook, and then began “fixing” them with subtraction. This makes them harder to conserve, while joking whether they are good enough to bother saving. In doing so he saved everyone the trouble of trying to imagine the inside of his paintings by revealing all of their inner workings, all with a process that he wasn’t sure about.

Matthew Janisse  
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