

To Matt
well what
can I say

John M

June 17

2009

“Well what can I say” is what John Brown wrote when he signed my copy of the book that accompanied his retrospective show at the MOCCA in 2009. Now that he’s gone, I find myself with the same sentiment in mind.

As he always did, he spread his enthusiasm amongst his friends regarding their ideas while sharing his perspective, which was infectious. So in kind, I will try to impart some of the lessons I gleaned from being his student, his assistant, his studio mate and ultimately a close friend. To make this interesting lets frame it in the context of one of our many lunchtime visits, the last of which happened a few weeks before he passed, I think he would appreciate that.

The Anatomy of a lunch at John Brown’s studio

Arriving at about 12:10pm, I knock on the dark grey door with a ridiculously small label bearing his name “John Brown”. I have a key and he knows I’m coming but I do it out of common courtesy. He yells, “Come in” and follows up by saying my name with an extended drawl that makes me smile and we have a hug. After exchanging brief pleasantries he invites me to sit on “the couch”. As usual it has a smattering of his belongings strewn to either side of a vacant seat. It’s filthy, but since I coming from work, so am I and I don’t mind in the slightest. There is always music playing, today it’s an obscure garage punk band that I haven’t heard of before, so he starts telling me about them with a joyful mischievousness in his voice. I can tell he is equating it to his days running wild in the streets with his band “Rongwrong” back in the early 1980’s.

I hand him one of the two soups of the day, today its red lentil, and one of the coffees that I bought from the café in the lobby of the 401 Richmond building. He offers to pay for both but today I say “my treat” but he insists on paying for his. This inevitably leads to talk of the recipes that we’ve tried recently, with our resulting successes and failures laid bare. He starts reminiscing about a time he tried smuggling a giant wheel of cheese, back home from a trip to Europe, and getting caught at customs due to the obvious smell. We laugh and he summarized about being stuck with way too much cheese for one person to eat. Again laughing, the song changes.

After finishing our soups we turn to the state of affairs currently occurring in the studio. The assemblage of large paintings flanks the walls, which are propped up on milk crates with the smaller paintings resting on the shelf by the door. This is the body of our visit. I take in the changes he has made since last time we visited and comment on a particular happening within the second painting from the left. “I really like this part with the Vermilion on what’s left of this Naples yellow, it looks like a broken web” I say. He responds knowingly “Yeah but it’s not gonna stay that

way” as he’s said many times, then adds, “Nothing is precious...but you can’t know if something is going to work unless you try it” referring not only to the painting. This leads us to revisit a previous discussion we’ve had about the conversation the artist has with a painting as it is being formed. We both acknowledge that, within the act painting, the opening volley of disruption that violates the pristine primed surface transforms the materials from something inanimate into something else. A back and forth ensues between these two acquaintances. The surface, at times, beckons loudly for an answer to the current circumstance. With an unspoken understanding we continue along surmising the other conversations at hand. John describes the argument he is having with the painting leaning against the wall closest to the couch; in essence they’re not on speaking terms at the moment. So he asks for my help in turning it 90 degrees with hopes that a change in orientation can break the current stalemate. Moving on, he continues about slight agreements he is having with parts of the smaller one closest to the door. We meander around the table full of paints and across the studio “This one is done” he says with confidence of the large painting in the corner. We both know that there were things left unsaid between them, there always is. This one time acquaintance, now a fully formed visceral dependent, stands surrounded with paint shavings on its milk crates. You can tell that the conversation was hard and they didn’t always agree with one another. John’s confidence, I’ve learned, comes from the reverence they’ve created between them that transcend their differences. There is no ego in these conversations with his materials. These negotiations are necessary for them to determine what is tolerable between them from moment to moment. The album finishes.

Guided by Voices comes on next inside the 5 disc CD changer, it’s an old favorite with its catchy quick songs, and the tone of the room changes. We have a seat facing the paintings. I take the squeaky stool, and John takes the battered rolling chair. “I have been thinking a lot about Herb... I miss him” he says, I nod in acknowledgement. We let that just sit in the air allowing the appropriate amount of time to pass as the song winds down familiarly. “How is your project coming along?” he asks as the next song takes an upbeat turn. I report on what’s happening and tell him my thoughts and strategies of how to keep it moving forward. He supportively agrees and adds, “You have good ideas Matt. I can’t see why they wouldn’t want to do something like this”. I’m thankful for the encouragement and ask about Sandra. He tells me angrily about her care worker who has been using her van for personal use after hours. Digressing, he says that he is making her a Moroccan inspired dinner on Friday night and that that reminds him he has to pick up some ingredients on his way home. Speaking of others, he goes on to report on what the Howards are up to and then mentioning that he ran into Rocky in the hallway of the building a few days ago. He asks about my wife Joanna and the kids and I give him the updates. I carry on telling him about my friend Dan and his latest projects. He says Gareth and Caroline have stopped by recently and the new girl across the hall is very nice. We pivot to gallery business briefly and he laments about wanting to do more shows

in Montreal and Berlin but is concerned that he only has enough time to make paintings for his next show at Olga's. The album changes again.

Roy Orbison comes on and I glance at the clock. It's already 12:55pm. Now I'm officially stretching my lunch hour but we can't stop kibitzing. John starts in about having trouble with sending images on his phone and how much he hates using Facebook. I agree with him and go on to share a similar problem that I had sending images and a remedy that worked for me. I stand up and put our empty bowls in the trash and begin to slowly start gathering up my bike helmet and backpack. John is still talking; he has moved on to the idiocy of the city's progress on bike lanes "They should be everywhere!" he exclaims. I agree silently with a gesture that indicates the futility of the situation. I say "Sorry John, I have to get going" but my tone relates that I don't want to leave. This doesn't slow down his rant in the least. His cynicism about politicians is now palpable. After a thorough shitting on the powers that be he comes around to the inevitability of my departure. "Alright Matt I know you have to go... Let's do this more oftenI miss you being here all the time". "I do to" I say, then asking "how about Monday?" "Message me Monday morning to remind me" he says. With that, he stretches out his arms for a final hug. "Goodbye John" I say on my way out the door "goodbye Matt" he responds as the dark grey door with the ridiculously small label bearing his name "John Brown" closes.

Thank you John,
We miss you
Matt