

Brown's Late Period II: The Archaeology of Dread and the *Work of Art*

I have stressed throughout this comprehensive reflection on Brown's work that he was never an overtly political artist. He felt, like Marcuse and Adorno, that obvious sloganeering failed both as art and as politics. Socially, artists are too isolated to have any effect on the major currents of political life and artistically, the instrumentalization of sound, image, structure, and gesture to convey an obvious message lacks the imaginative transformation of experience through artistic work that Brown believed to its *differentia specifica*. Nevertheless, Brown also rejected the detached formalistic abstraction from the human experience of the world of meaningful things that characterised, in his view, mid-twentieth century abstract expressionism. Labelled an expressionist early on in his career, the label does capture something of the relationship between Brown's art and the concrete problems of human experience. His goal as an artist was not to illustrate or describe but to provoke, through his painterly work, a changed experience of our relationship to our bodies, each other, our life-horizons, and the things of the world. If we think of the domain of politics broadly as the total set of institutions, policies, laws, and regulations that govern our lives, then every practice or movement that intervenes to produce, contest, or change those structures has a political dimension. Brown's work was not partisan and he had no interest in rallying people to a cause, but it did concern how we value our lives within the structures in which they must be lived. Brown's paintings did not offer instructions about how to navigate the problems of work and conflict, vulnerability to disease and aging, and our inescapable mortality. They are "expressionist" because they invite viewers into Brown's way of navigating these problems to see if they might find their own experiences deepened, or at least altered. unique way into these problems. If viewers accept the invitation and are led in a direction they might not have gone otherwise the change is political to the extent

that it is also a motivation for changed valuations of the person's relationship to self, others, and world.

As we have seen, Brown's work developed from the existentially charged but formally simple grease pencil sketches of stripped down male figures labouring, wrestling, and bearing their crosses (literally and figuratively) to some of the most richly detailed, visually complex, and aesthetically arresting paintings of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Thematically, as I have emphasised, the majority of these works concern the "frames of finitude" that follow from our embodied being.¹ These problems never disappear from Brown's work, but the final period also contains series and individual paintings that stand out as more directly politically engaged than the majority of his works. Formally, they were constructed with the same severe scraping technique that I examined in detail in the previous essay. But whereas the figures in the series that I examined in "The Infinite Within and Without" have an enigmatic relationship to concrete objects, there are other paintings from this period that are more overtly connected to trends in early twenty-first century political life that express concern for the future of humanity. These paintings can be divided into two distinct groups. The first explore the dangers of surveillance and police control generated by technological developments. The second evoke a nostalgia for the dignity of flesh and blood humans through portraits of loved ones and more indirect visual evocations of basic human social functions and relationships.

Brown believed that the artist's life should exemplify the freedom that all human beings should enjoy. Brown very much believed that art was work, but non-alienated work, in the

¹ See Jeff Noonan, *Embodiment and the Meaning of Life*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2018, and Jeff Noonan, *Embodied Humanism: Towards Sensuousness and Solidarity*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 2022.

deepest sense that Marx intended by this term. In his famous *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx described non-alienated labour simply as “free, conscious activity.” While the output of artistic labour is an art commodity, the practices through which it is created are free in so far as they are the product of the artist’s imagination and creative practice and worked out not according to an imposed schedule but freely, taking the time required to arrive at a work which is completed when it resolves itself. Brown savoured this freedom and celebrated and jealously guarded it. He was opposed to anything which threatened the freedom of artistic creativity and by extension anything which constrained and confined any individual’s sensory and experiential horizons within the confines of a dogma, a single exclusive perspective, or a humorless and dour faux seriousness that claims self-righteously to bear the weight of the world.

The things, sights, smells, sounds, textures of the world should be open and available to all. The artist’s job is to multiply the forms that these objects of the human sensorium can take, break free of the tyranny and boredom of literalness, and to constantly confront people with new possibilities for feeling and relating. He did not see the growth of digital technologies as transhumanist technotopians see them, as the means by which we will liberate ourselves from the flesh. He saw them as tool in the hands of the state and police to monitor and control our thoughts and movements and to confine our activity within conventional structures of experience. The flesh may be weak and vulnerable, but everything great about human beings is a function of the way in which we wrestle ourselves to accept the consequences of birth, precarious health, and death. The technotopian promise, he worried, was a sales job to distract attention from its real agenda of control and domination.

The final set of paintings from this final period of Brown’ career present contrasting thematics to the viewer. On the one hand, series like *Five Attempts to Paint Contemporary*

Anxieties and the *Drone* paintings, as well as stand alone works like *Windsor*, *Wrong Place*, *Wrong Time*, and especially *Stupid # 1* are menacing evocations of the dangers of the state use of technological power. The tone of threat and looming danger is intensified when these works are compared with others of the same period like *Double Portrait of Herb Sigman*, the *Watching* series, and the *Herb's Handwriting* series. These later are tender, loving memoriations of lost friends and loved ones and the simple pleasure sitting still, sensuously open to a world which remains beautiful even as threats gather around us. The cold and calculating logic of machine functioning contrasts with the warmth generated by human sensuous receptivity of the world of lived experience. The machine does what it is programmed to do but human emotions are not similarly programmable. We do not respond to the memory of a dead lover the same way we respond to the memory of a stranger and no amount of recoding can alter our spontaneous emotional dispositions. Those responses derive from our embodied, subjective, and unique experience of the world, not generic algorithms. Like art works, our sensuous relationship with the people and things of the world are singularities. Taken together these final world can be read as warnings that we will lose everything valuable in life if we become so alienated from our sensuous nature that we believe the technotopian promise that the body is a death machine and that our future lies in becoming disembodied functions of a computer program.² Practical immortality seduces with its sales pitch of limitless experience, but the body teaches that all real, meaningful experience is determinate and limited. The ironic outcome of the quest for the omnipotence will be subservience to the corporations that make and sell the products needed to

² For a medically informed account of how it might be possible to progressively extend our physical lives without limit, see Aubrey De Grey, *Ending Aging*, (New York), St. Martin's Griffin), 2007. For a speculative account of how human beings might become practically immortal by uploading our consciousness into an emergent super-intelligent computer network see Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Real*, (New York: penguin), 2005, 369-390.

complete the journey from embodied subject to digital divinity. With life comes loss, but if we are afraid to bear its weight, we also give up the experience of beauty of human contact.

The first two sections of this essay will examine the contrast between the themes and emotional tenor of key works in this final set of paintings. I will begin with the paintings which suggested the title of this essay to me. The human presence is only negatively suggested in these series, the unpictured object on which the depicted machinery of the architecture of dread operates. Hidden within prison-like structures, surveyed from above by drones, held at a distance by armored vehicles, the vulnerable flesh is present in its absence as that towards which the painting draws our concern. The paintings are never melodramatic and are successful as paintings regardless of how one reads them, but they are unique in Brown's body of work for gaining in power when they are interpreted as a synthesis of political content and aesthetic form.

The second section will contrast these paintings with those which bring the human form back into the centre of the work. Examined in relation to each other both sides amplify the power of the other. Nothing emphasises the terrifying vulnerability of bodies than the violence that state power can reign upon them. By the same token, nothing condemns the power of state violence more than the simple pleasures of being co-present with others that we love.

Philosophers and politicians have promised utopias for thousands of years, and have imprisoned, exiled, beaten, tortured, and killed outsiders who failed to see the wisdom of the plans. The dystopic elements of Brown's work from the beginning, but especially in these final paintings, are not pessimistic, but socially simplistic: liberation is not an end goal of political struggle but the eternal present of people who cease to think in world historical terms but pay attention to the person in front of them right now.

In the final section I would like to draw some provisional conclusions about Brown's *corpus* as a whole by reflecting on it from the standpoint of the twentieth century critical focus on aesthetic *form*. I want to suggest that the historical importance of Brown's work from a critical (as opposed to experiential-aesthetic or art historical) perspective is the way in which its method of creation exemplifies the co-equal importance of the material dimension of art works. The aesthetics of form can imply that materials are the passive substance unproblematically shaped by the imagination of the artist into the finished work. On this view, artists, like Marx's architect "erects their structures first in imagination"—mind guides the hand to structure and form the material until the object perfectly copies the subjective idea from which the process began.³ Picking up on comments I made in the preceding essay concerning the evolutionary and dialectical practice that defined Brown's mature works, I will argue that the particulars of Brown's practice exemplify general truths about the nature of art *work*. The creation of any work of art is a form of human labour, but human labour is not simple translation of subjective idea into objective form. It is also a process of working out an idea in material that has its own integrity and resists the worker at every step. The outcome of artistic labour is thus always a result of a back and forth between idea and material embodiment. The active role that the material plays means that the finished product is never exactly as the artist conceived it and owes as much to the resistance the material offers to human ideas as to those ideas themselves.

Observation and Confinement

Brown was not a technophobe. He did not continue to paint for nostalgic reasons but because he felt that the expressive powers of that medium had not been exhausted. Although his

³ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1986, 174.

later works warn about the dangers that surveillance and police technologies pose for human beings, he was not averse to using digital technologies in his own practice. He would take hundreds of photographs of works in progress and explore how they might be developed by manipulating the images using *Photoshop*. He never tried to simply illustrate any of the photoshopped images as means of expediting the completion of a painting. He continued to let the image resolve itself through the back and forth of application and removal of paint, but he would treat the photoshopped images as suggestions to be explored while maintaining the open-endedness of his usual practice.

I want to stress that Brown was not concerned with abstract social criticism but always with image-making. He began his career as a photographer, not a painter, and retained a love of photography, architecture, and music, all of which are highly technologically mediated art forms. The warnings implicit in the paintings I will discuss are not calls to abandon technology for some romantic vision of a pre-technological past but warnings not to get so lost in the magic of technological power that we lose site of its origins in human brains and hands. Brown's real concern is with the potential loss of our embodied humanity. If he cautions against anything it is a certain naïve belief that binary code will set us free. The sort of freedom from all constraints imposed on our imaginations by material reality that it promises would be either illusory or a pyrrhic victory. The imagination would be freed—but from the embodied limitations of human subjectivity with which are the material conditions of meaningful and life-valuable experience. As I will argue in the last section, art, indeed, human creations of any sort, become meaningful because they require effort and their successful realization is never guaranteed. Technotopian fantasies of creativity without struggle with recalcitrant matter fail to understand the all-

important role that material resistance to our ideas plays in the production of humanly meaningful forms.

Whenever something sounds too good to be true it almost always is. The promised land will not match one's anticipations which will be exposed as a fantasy projection created by the real estate agent's pitch. In the case of computing technologies, the power of state surveillance and police control over thought and practice lies not very far beneath the veneer of technotopian dreams. Brown was a fan of critic of the digital life Evgeny Morozov whose work is devoted to exposing the political naivete of champions of the liberatory power of social networks and instantaneous communication.⁴ The state knows how to use Facebook and X and dissidents actually make it easier for authoritarian regimes to track them than had they organized the old fashioned way, underground, face to face, rather than broadcasting their plans through media that leave an electronic trace. This argument is less difficult to make today, when the Internet has become a swamp of closed-minded camps each thumping the table in favour of their own version of social reality, but in the early 2000s, when Brown began thinking about these problems, virtual networks were celebrated as uncontrollable circuits of informational power that would topple every autocrat and unleash the creative citizen-scientist-artist-intellectual in all of us.⁵

Brown was more hedonist than pessimist, but he was never naïve about the dark side of human reality. His abiding realism about the built-in dangers of embodied being clearly underlies the *Five Attempts to Paint Contemporary Anxieties* series from 2017. These are not the first set of paintings to evoke a sense of dread for the future, but they exemplify the argument of

⁴ Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, (New York: Public Affairs), 2011.

⁵ See for example Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2009, 349-355.

this section, so I begin with them rather than take a chronological approach. Brown put a great deal of thought into the titles of most of his paintings. They were often playful in-jokes, but they almost always expressed information that led the viewer into the painting. Of course, they were not instructions about how the work should be read, but they did provide a glimpse of Brown's thinking as he worked out the paintings. One does not need any commentary to appreciate the implications of the title of the series. Brown would worry about how the walls were closing in on him as he aged, but this general existential dread was matched in these later series by a political concern with the enclosure of social and experiential space by state surveillance agencies. The political and existential anxieties reinforce each other in this series.

Anxiety might be a normal and natural response to a future that we do not control, but it remains a singularly uncomfortable feeling. These large (ranging from 72x78 to 84x72) panels evoke the disquiet of our age of anxiety. There are no figures in the paintings but each centres on a structure that is either carceral or robotic in appearance. Compositionally, they vary. Two employ the severe scrapping technique that isolates and emphasises a robotic figure at the centre. The others are more smoothly painted with the central figure composed in black barely standing out against black, blue and rusty coloured backgrounds. The human being is present by its absence, possibly locked away in the buildings of #s 4 and 5, or being surveyed, or about to be attacked by the floating or hovering robotic system portrayed in #3. But the most powerful of these paintings is #2, which appears to be an allusion to Goya's *The Sleep of Reason*, from *Los Capricos*. One of Browns' first large panel paintings was an homage to *The Disasters of War*, and "The Sleep of Reason" etching was the subject of one of the eight panels. I do not know if Brown consciously referenced Goya and his own homage, but it is a fitting allusion whether intended or not. Goya worried about the demons that are unleashed in dreams or in waking life

when we relinquish rational control. Today, the threat is reason itself unhinged from reflection on human purposes and goods and the best means of realizing them. The bat-like figure is framed from above by red and rust coloured paint: a fire that menaces and would consume any who got too close.



5 Attempts to Make Paintings of Contemporary Anxieties #2 (2017) Oil on Wood 72×78

Anxiety, unlike worries, is general and formless, and this series masterfully evokes the generic dread that the uncertainty of the future stir up. Far more concrete are the concerns expressed in 2013-2014's series of Drone paintings. The early twenty-first century gave birth to a terrifying new form of military activity, the drone war. Hovering beyond and above the target's sight-lines drones controlled from thousands of miles away by near-teenagers thinking they were playing a video game would suddenly unleash their appropriately named Hellfire missiles. In an instant the target would be vaporized. Brown's paintings are not explicit condemnations of American war crimes and they do not make explicit reference to the military

use of drones. In appearance they are more like aircraft that one might see in a post-apocalypse science fiction dystopic movie (Brown loved the genre). They also have whimsical and silly names (Bubble Puppy, Wimple Witch, Dolly Rocker (after a band that he liked). While there is a certain playfulness to the depiction of the drones, the impression that the paintings leave is not one of harmless B-movie fun but terror at confronting silent, death-dealing machines. The menace is especially apparent in Wimple Witch (Drone 3).



Wimple Witch (Drone 3) (2014) Oil on Wood 78×72

The machine is equal parts space and structure, paradoxically heavy and light, held aloft by a flaming exhaust. The figure is off-centre, located in the upper left quarter of the panel, and seems to be moving off, about to leave the frame after completing its mission. As with the Anxiety paintings, people are present only by their absence. We do not see them but we can project their existence down below, in the crosshairs or already annihilated.

In the sets of paintings discussed above the title of the works and the image work together to communicate the warning about the dangers of the contemporary moment. The stand alone painting *Windsor* (2015) is arguably the most political painting that Brown ever made, but in order to understand the meaning of the relationship between the title and the figure one must know the origin of the painting.



Windsor (2015) Oil on Wood 72×78

Like most of his mature paintings it began with a photograph, in this case of a Windsor Police armoured car. Although the figure is an imposing black vehicle the direct connection between them is not immediately apparent, although the threat that such a vehicle would pose to unarmored human flesh is clear. This painting is a rare case where Brown was actually moved to paint out of anger towards a political issue: in this case, the militarization of the police. From talking with him during the composition of the painting I know that he was incredulous that civilian police forces would be outfitted with military equipment. Brown did not intend the painting as a rallying cry against the militarization of the police. The geographical title leaves

the viewer free to explore the painting on their own terms, but it would be hard to come away from looking at it without having felt a tone of aggressive threat. The image is no straightforward depiction of the armored vehicle, but it retains more of a visual connection to the photograph from which Brown worked than is usual. It is pure black set off against a bright red swatch of paint beneath and bright blue to the right. There is little scarping work and the vehicular structure of the image is clear. As with the paintings discussed above the car is closed to the world: there are no windows, it moves through the city observing citizens without their being able to observe the observers.

A similar tone of looming state violence emanates from the ominously titled *Wrong Place, Wrong Time* (2015).



Wrong Place, Wrong Time (2015) Oil on Wood 72x84

One's exposure to violence, the title suggests, is geometrical. People are out minding their own business, walking in a certain direction, and happen upon a situation which they could not have foreseen and would not have encountered had they been following a different vector. They end

up victims through no fault of their own. When one looks at the figure, a thematic connection with *Windsor* becomes apparent. *Wrong Place, Wrong Time* is also centred around a flat black vehicle closed to the outside world and clearly a menace to anyone who happens across its path. No good will come from the encounter, the title says, and the image shows us why. The vehicle is not made for pleasure, for “joy riding” as the old expression goes, but to intimidate, let people know who is boss. People will regret having crossed paths with it. Its structure is less dense than the armoured car in *Windsor*, but the background is more severely scrapped, lending a heaviness to the vehicle it would otherwise lack. Violence is everywhere, the painting implies, and vehicles like this are necessary to maintain order and control. But the fact that only this car is pictured suggests that whatever the motives of the group that built it and operate it, once it starts patrolling the streets it becomes the problem. It does not exist to render verdicts of guilt and innocence, but to dominate and control space. When the means of violence proliferate their use becomes more probable. When their use becomes ubiquitous and normalized, every street corner becomes a potential scene of state violence. The drive for total security ends up victimizing everyone. Brown is more bearing witness than protesting, but when the official spokespersons of the world deny reality, testifying to the suppressed truth is a political act.

Anxiety, drones, police vehicles, violence rained upon victims in the wrong place at the wrong time: these series and single paintings mark a contrast with what could be- the world as a free space for exploration and imaginative creation. Brown suggests that the world is ours to explore, but in order to explore, one must move about in space and render oneself suspect simply for appearing in public. One might encounter something extraordinary, but one also becomes the object of surveillance, threat assessment, and potential violence. Another stand alone painting from (2011) evokes the contrast between free exploration of the world and the carceral reality of

much of contemporary society. *Tatlarin* is named after the city in Turkey that Brown and his partner Sigman visited in order to view the frescoes painted in the cave churches. I suggested in “The Infinite Within and Without” that the weathered appearance of these frescoes perhaps inspired Brown’s experiments with more and more severe scrapping techniques. *Tatlarin* does not evoke the frescoes but instead presents the viewer with an imposing flat black structure hermetically sealed off from the world.



Tatlarin (2011) Oil on Wood 72×84

It is the heaviest looking and feeling of the structures depicted in these series and resembles a prison much more than any place of worship. Nothing about its outer appearance suggest to the viewer that there is anything but human misery enclosed within its solid walls. No light, no sound, no person can escape from this enclosure. What goes on within is a mystery to anyone on

the outside, but there is nothing inviting about the structure. It floats there in scrapped down painted space, as if posing the question: am I what you came to see? The building is a complex of rectangles and not a vortex, but its density suggests that, like a black hole, the unfortunates who fall into it will never escape. Even the memory of their having been might disappear within its walls forever.

A more enigmatically named series of paintings from 2008 are more abstract and organic in appearance, but still evoke feelings of danger and dread. The 6 paintings in this series are named after their dominant colours: *blackblack*, *blackgreen*, and so on. They are somewhat smaller than the paintings discussed above (66x48) but still large enough to impose themselves on the visual field and command the attention of the viewer. While the colours are arranged in sometimes supple and rounded forms, the black always designates an angular structure which again suggests forcible confinement, imprisonment, deprivation of light and fresh and air.



Redredblack (2008) Oil on Wood, 48x66

Some of these structures float, drone like, others are more rooted; some are divided into complex rectangular complexes, others are a singular solid mass, but all are painted in the same flat black and are closed off to the world outside. Whatever activity might go on within their walls would be constrained and regimented, a machine like activity that contrasts sharply with the imaginative exploration of space and objects from which the artistic labour that creates these paintings arises. In crises, beset by anxiety, human beings might crave security above all, but they can never be sure, once they sign off on authoritarian measures, if they themselves will not end up victims of the surveillance and carceral regime. Better, therefore, to be anxious and free than secure and imprisoned.

All of these lines of political concern with oppressive surveillance, imprisonment and constraint on free activity and experience, and the domination of the flesh by machines come together in the largest painting (119x90) in Brown's *oeuvre*, 2011's *Stupid # 1*.



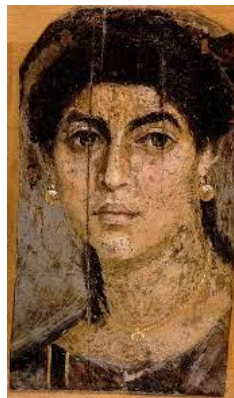
Stupid # 1 (2011), Oil on Wood, 116x96

Visibly inspired by the Sidney Nolan *Ned Kelly* paintings that Brown loved (the head of the figure is clearly alluding to the way Nolan paints Kelly's armored helmet) the painting confronts the viewer with a huge robot or cyborg. The composition is almost entirely black and supremely menacing in tone. The figure is only partially distinguished from the black background, its face and torso illuminated by the stripped-down paint to its right. Only its head is allowed any real definition. The entity is not depicted in an aggressive posture. It simply looms, impassive and immobile, observing the situation. Brown was a big fan of pop culture and playful even at his most serious. Afficionados of 60's science fiction might see something of the robot from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* in the figure. But recall: that robot came not to conquer but to warn that we are destroying ourselves. But we can destroy ourselves negatively, by undermining the life-support capacity of the planet, but also positively, by re-doubling our efforts to escape the purportedly weak flesh for the practical immortality of cyberspace. If everything valuable about *human* life is a function of the frames of finitude within which it must be lived (dependence on world and others, the liability to failure, susceptibility to disease, and death) then transcendence of these frames—the defining promise of technotopian transhumanism—is as sure a way of destroying *humanity* as making the planet unliveable. The robot in *Stupid # 1* appears incapable of either joy or sorrow. Frankenstein's monster shared our body and emotions. He was destroyed by the fact that while he longed for human society and love like the humans from whose body parts he was built, his mechanical assembly terrified anyone who encountered him. While the figure in *Stupid # 1* is humanoid in form, everything about its appearance suggests that it is an artificial life form. If one wants to become a machine, it perhaps says, give up the illusion that you can cross the threshold with your human values in tact. Machines register, record, organize, and function, but they do not enjoy, they do not create, they do not hope or

struggle. Here is the future, the painting says, think carefully about whether it is the one you really want.

Memoriation: Traces of the Human

Human life entails loss. To grow into adulthood means developing the strength to bear the thought of one's own death as well as the pains caused by the death of others. We deal with the fear of death by staying active and concentrating on the present and near-future goals. We bear the loss of the death of loved one's by remembering their presence. One of the oldest functions of art is memoriation. Think of the magnificent Fayum portraits or the hand prints left in the French cave that Werner Herzog explored in his documentary, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2011).



These faces and hands say simply: we were here and this our mark of having been, carry us forward into your time and preserve these representations for the future, that we might not completely disappear from the world. Memoriation does not conquer death, but it does elevate it. Death is final for the consciousness of the person, but not their effects on the world, not their *mattering* to the present and future. So long as there is memory there is presence, of a sort, and so long as there is presence the world is different than it would have been had the dead person never have been.

Artistic representation via portraiture is distinct from the precise machine recording of images and sounds. Artistic representation, like human memory, transforms as it recalls. Classical portraiture before the age of photography did try to render the appearance of the subject accurately, but even the most literal depiction stressed some traits and downplayed others, tried to convey definite messages about the person through their pose and dress, and was more about signifying the meaning of the person's life than providing a detailed and complete record of the facts of their life history. Machines operate according to a logic of perfection, never actually attainable but always the justification for their substitution for the analogous human practice. The robots that stamp out microchips pound away in the dark, without need for supervision, never get tired and never complain and never make mistakes because they get distracted by random thoughts. Some people think that it would be a good idea to replace baseball umpires by robotic sensors because the sensors would never make a mistake. Transhumanists tantalise with their fantasies about consciousness without material body which could skate the circuits of cyberspace forever without growing bored, getting sick, getting old, or dying. But those who want the ump replaced by the machine should also demand that the players be replaced by

machines too. After all, players make mistakes too. But the perfectionists do not demand that the players be replaced because they understand that the drama that makes the game worth watching is a function of the mistake. A perfectly pitched game cannot coexist with a perfectly batted game. There are no hits in a perfectly pitched game and no outs in a perfectly batted game. The tensions of real games is a function of waiting for the mistake to be made. There would be no drama to a perfect game if we knew in advance that it had been programmed into the computer generating the virtual action, and run after run after run without end would be unwatchable tedium. The mistake is the lifeblood of human creation and valuable experience.

If we defined an absolutely perfect rendering as a complete replication of the person in every detail, then a painted portrait is always a mistake. It is what it is because it edits, leaves out, distorts, and modifies. In the portrait the artist comments on the person, draws out some aspects of their personality while de-emphasising others. Brown's portraits going back to the *Human Heads* series support my point. If compared to an actual human head, Brown's portraits are grotesque. But read as interpretations of human finitude as borne its burden is carried by imaginary but exemplary subjects, they express the moral strength that people display in being resolute in the face of their impending death. As I have noted, Brown always insisted that his work was figurative, but many of the best paintings in his final period that I have discussed in the previous essay end up quite far from the photographed object from which they began. But his final period also contains some of the most tender portraits of his career.

It is as if he had two competing thoughts in mid between 2008 and 2019: the threat posed to the future of humanity by technological development and the value of the sheer human presence because of and not in spite of the ephemerality of our lives. Brown was troubled by growing older and also had to cope with chronic illness and ultimate loss of his long-time

partner, Herb Sigman, during this period. Two portraits of Sigman and six paintings of his handwriting testify to the depth of their bond. But there are also portraits of anonymous people as well as evocative paintings named after basic forms of receptive and active human relationships to the world: waiting, listening, speaking. There is a melancholy undertone to the different series that form this side of his final period of work, but overall I read them collectively as celebrations of the mundane. They are different expressions of the thought that although everyone dies, their lives have left a trace of their having been in the world. I will begin my discussion with *8 Portraits of Thoroughly Researched People*.

8 Portraits of Thoroughly Researched People return to familiar ground: the medical photograph as the source material for the painting. The paintings were composed separately over a period of three years but hung together in the ... show. Hung as a unified set of 8 paintings they dominated the east wall of the Korper gallery. However, even though they were hung together and worked well as a whole, visually, they retained their individuality. The viewer could stand back and experience the work as a complex unity or concentrate their attention on particular panels. While the title and the somewhat eccentric appearance of the subjects (either slightly elongated or squashed down) suggest that they were composed with the objectifying gaze of the researcher or clinician (the original photographs were examples of just such an objectifying gaze), there is a tenderness to them which also contests the power of the scientific reduction of people to specimens and examples.



8 Portraits of Thoroughly Researched People (2017) Oil on Wood, 8 panels, 60x48 each

The success of the series depends on this tension between the dignity-negating implications of the scientific objectification of persons and the dignity-recovering function of portraiture. In some ways they are reminiscent of Valezquez's dwarf paintings. Their power consists in unsettling the viewer: are these paintings meant to mock their subjects or as a riposte to those who would mock them? By elevating them to the same status as monarchs and great nobility Valezquez on the one hand affirms their human importance. On the other hand, by emphasising those physical features that made them targets of suspicion and ridicule, Valezquez might also have been making a visual joke at their expense. That Valezquez refuses to be obvious either way forces the viewer into the uncomfortable position of not knowing whether or not they should enjoy the painting. Brown forces the viewers of *8 Portraits* into a similarly uncomfortable position: are we gawking at the afflicted as older generations would have stared

at carnival freak shows, or are we witnessing art liberate victims of the medicalization of human being? Portraiture requires careful observation of the subject, and in this sense it derives from the same sort of objectifying analysis as science. Brown's appropriating the photographic documentation of disease inserts his work into the heart of the problem, but his visual quotations of these images re-humanize their subjects. Viewed from the later perspective one can feel the discomfort the original subjects must have felt as they were stripped down and posed from the clinician's camera. Yet, these figures are not nearly as transformed by Brown's brush and scraping work as the figures in the *Heads, Autopsy, or Disease* paintings. Neither reading can free itself from its opposite, and the viewer is left to fret over whether or not they are complicit with the personhood denying medicalization or freeing themselves from complicity by seeing the individual shining through the diagnostic image. Art shows, it does not tell: the paintings can be read equally well either way and both together. Brown refuses to provide a recipe for how they are to be interpreted.

As with most of Brown's engagement with human figures, the vulnerability of the body, both to disease and to power, is central to *8 Portraits*. Brown was not morbidly fascinated with death and decay: he was in love with life, but love of life, like love of others, must be honest or it will be destroyed by puerile illusions of permanence. Being born is not only a death sentence, but an opportunity for a whole host of pathogens to live on and through us. And yet, despite the dangers, threats, and certainty of death we manage to live. There is something heroic, but brown was not in the business of constructing romantic heroes. The beauty of life lies in the everyday, not the world historical achievement.

The 5 painting series shown in 2011 evoke this truth. Named after the everyday practices, the paintings link to both the sensuous and intellectual dimensions of human being.

They celebrate the uncomplicated pleasures that make life worth living. The human figure is mostly absent from these paintings even though the activities named in the title: eating, listening, watching, waiting, and speaking presuppose a human subject. *Listening* depicts what looks to be a figure slumped over in a chair, head perhaps cocked to hear someone out of frame, while *Watching* depicts a floating, faceless Buddha-like figure. To the left a shaft of light formed by completely scarping away the black paint serves to illuminate the figure, but its is present only in outline. All details about its appearance are absorbed into the flat black paint that shapes it. *Eating* combines a black geometrical structure with more organic looking material spread out on its surface (or contained within a shallow concave depression) but it would be impossible to determine what its objective referent might be. The surface of *Speaking* has been mostly scraped down. The surface is mostly devoid of structure save for a head-like figure painted with Brown's delicate cross-hatch brush work. It almost glows red against the mostly white background. Finally, *Waiting* presents what looks like a town floating in a white background and framed above by a thin wash of red wash paint that evokes dawn or dusk: is the town being born or is the town dying?



Waiting (2011), Oil on Wood, 96x108

Together, the paintings that compose this series evoke the ordinariness of human connection to the world, an evocation made all the stronger by the fact that they were composed in the same year as *Stupid #1*. Thinking this series together with *Stupid #1* tempts one to think that Brown was suggesting that machines are complex and life is simple, but worth living well all the same.

The singular value of human life is expressed in the most intimate and loving paintings that Brown dedicated to his long-time partner Herb Sigman. “The Double Portrait of Herb Sigman” and the six *Herb’s Handwriting* paintings focus on the two most personal markers of a person’s identity: the face, by which we recognize them, and the hand by which they translate their inner into outer life.



Double Portrait of Herb Sigman, (2014-15) Oil on Wood 72×84

The face of the lover is what causes the smile upon a reunion; the hand is the organ through which we work, gesture, write and, in general, “make our mark” on the world. Brown would not be Brown if we were obvious and overt in his treatment of Sigman’s face or handwriting. The only way one can tell that the double portrait is of Sigman is through the title: there are no recognizable facial features depicted. The handwriting paintings likewise obscure the script (copied from two different periods in Sigman’s life, first as a young volunteer in Ethiopia and

then toward the end of his life, as he struggled with Alzheimer's) with a thin wash of paint. The wash makes the writing illegible, shifting our attention to it as marking because its literal meaning cannot be discerned. The double portrait evokes the quiet but dignified presence that Sigman was in life, but the handwriting paintings introduce a novel practice into Brown's work whose formal and thematic possibilities had perhaps not been fully explored at the time of his death.

Our faces and our handwriting individuate us. A person's handwriting can be copied but never simulated without remainder because it is the outer expression and reality of a person's inner life, the legible analogue of our voice. The outer sounds and appearance of both voice and handwriting can be copied but their truth as expressions of the inner thoughts of the person is lost.



Love Letter 1 (2019) Oil on Wood 78×84

Written language has a peculiar materiality that Brown's paintings help us think about.

Handwritten language is a material sign whose function is to help constitute the symbolic

universe of human meanings. Unless there were sounds and letters there would be no world of linguistic meanings, but the meanings, though not inseparable from their material expressions, are not reducible to them. The poem is not the sound of the poet's voice or the shape of the letters, but the evocations, metaphors, rhythms, and cadences that are the poem could not exist without sound and written word. Language thus opens up a new dimension of the materially real, a human materiality built up from the silent elements of physical nature but realizing possibilities that inhere only in living natural systems. By blocking access to the meaning of Sigman's writing through covering the letters over with washes of paint Brown not only directs our attention to the strange geometry of cursive script, aesthetically compelling in its own right, but he also foregrounds the specific materiality of the human symbolic universe.

By making a *painting* about *writing* forces us to look at letters and words not as meaningful signs pointing beyond themselves but physical marks in the world. The temptation to try to decode the meaning of the painting by reading the writing is blocked by the illegibility of the script, forcing the viewer to re-evaluate their approach to both the painting and meaning in general. The symbolic dimension of reality is constantly trying to cut itself off from its specific materiality, as all idealist theories of art prove. Here Brown forces us to pay attention to its matter. By making a painting about writing that can only succeed by being visually compelling, Brown vindicates the active role that material structure and appearance play in the constitution and expression of meaning and value. One letter is shaped differently than another. Words are formed from letters and sentences from words. In order to express ourselves we have to give ourselves over to language as a material system. Use a different shape (letter) and you will produce a different word. Produce different words and you will compose a different sentence. Compose a different sentence and you will say something other than you intended to say. As

Derrida might argue, intentions are not in control of meanings but must be bent to the linguistic system which is, as Brown's paintings reveal, is material, not ideal.

By objectifying the objective expression of inner life, Brown focuses our attention on the essential role that arbitrary physical marks play in the construction of human meanings. Although the shape of letters is arbitrary (Cyrillic script is different from Roman, Roman from Greek, phonetic alphabets from ideographic languages) they are different from random squiggles. It is important to stress that while the sentences cannot be read the paintings are clearly paintings of English handwriting. As the existence of other alphabets prove, the letters of the Roman alphabet could have been shaped otherwise than they were. Necessity is a function of the repetition of randomness: 'a' is 'a' and not 'b' not because there is some essential connection between their respective shapes and their sounds but just because whomever first compiled the Roman alphabet moved their hand in those characteristic ways. Repeated millions of times over millennia, a shape becomes canonical and compulsory. Drawn by hand in cursive script, these canonical shapes are individuated to express not only meaning of others, but one's own unique intervention in the world. These individuated marks that we leave on the world outlast us. Even more so than photographs (which capture only the outer appearance), handwritten notes are powerful evocations of the departed. To hold a note that someone wrote in their own hand is almost to touch them once again. The "Handwriting" paintings function as tender memorials, but that they remember via meditation on handwriting makes them much more than nostalgic mementoes. One wonders where this new technique and subject matter could have gone had Brown himself not died in 2019.

One might worry that my reading of these paintings loads a bit too much philosophical reflection on to their backs. I agree that one must be careful to not project too much into and

onto these works. Paintings, like people, are singularities, not generalizable philosophical or political arguments. Whatever meaning they have is as much a function of the thoughts of viewers as the intentions of the artist, which disappear in any case into the finished work. The work must stand on its own as the work that it is, whether painting, or sculpture, or song, or poem. The work is minor or a masterpiece not because of the ideas that it suggests to different viewers, but because it has the visual or sonorous or evocative power to first of all grab and hold the viewer's, or reader's, or listener's attention. Meanings are always multiple, after the fact, and of secondary importance to the aesthetic qualities of the work. Whatever meanings that works of art have for different people in different times and contexts, they must first be produced as works. To conclude this essay and this series I want to turn to the unique way in which Brown's paintings pose the problem of art *work* and its implications for the general relationship between form and matter in artistic creations of all types.

The Materiality of Art *Work*

An important strand of twentieth century aesthetic theory tried to understand the work of art in terms of aesthetic form. Form is understood in contrast to both the subject matter of the work and its material components. All works of art, even the most abstract, are composed of physical materials and they also point beyond themselves as material objects to some sort of meaning, theme, historical referent, or subjective experience or intention on the part of the author. But if philosophers like Adorno and Marcuse are correct, that which makes a painted surface, an arrangements of words, or tones a painting, a poem, or a symphony is the form imposed on them by the artist. However, it is not an easy matter to say exactly what this form is. Modernism disrupted classical definitions of form in terms of beauty and beauty in terms of an overarching harmonious arrangement of parts. Beginning with Duchamp, even the difference

between art objects and everyday objects was called into question. After Duchamp, the formal properties of works of art had to include things like context and the social status of the artist. An ordinary object could become an art object if placed in a space recognized as a space where art objects are displayed by a person recognized as an artist. Perhaps the most radical of these experiments was John Cage's 4:33, in which the composition is the absence of all intentionally composed music. Instead, the performer sits silently at the piano for the designated period of time.

Nevertheless, even these experiments in collapsing the difference between the mundane and the constructed have the effect of drawing our attention to some *thing*. Hence the link between form and arrangement of parts is not severed completely. Cage was not playing a joke on his customers who came to hear music: he was creating a context in which they could listen to the sound of life going on all around them. Cage understood music as first and foremost sound, and sounds are everywhere. By not playing when the audience expected him to play he enabled them to listen to the world differently. So too Duchamp: a snow shovel ceases to be just a snow shovel when we look at it differently because it has been placed in a context where its functional properties are no longer important. Now we can look at it as a formal arrangement of parts as if it were sculpture and not a tool. Whether these experiments are successful or aesthetically valuable is not at issue here. What matters is the way in which they help us think of form by trying as hard as possible to free art from it.

The only way in which art could escape connection with form as the arrangement (deliberate or not) of parts would be to literally be nothing. If the work of art were nothing, however, it would not be art. Hence where there is art there is formal structuring of some sort of material. As Marcuse argues, "aesthetic form can be "tentatively defined" as "the result of the

transformation of a given content (actual or historical, personal or social fact) into a self-contained whole: a poem, play, novel, etc.). The work is then “taken out” of the constant process of reality and assumes a significance and truth of its own.”⁶ Even though a work like Cage’s 4:33 does not contain consciously structured tones, he does impose a time signature on the performance which has the effect of revealing to listeners that “silence” is full of sounds. These sounds organize themselves without the intervention of a composer, but the ‘composer has arranged the circumstances in which people could attend to what they might have thought was silence but discover is not, when they are put in the uncomfortable position of having to listen to it.

The “truth” of art that Marcuse refers to is not literal truth: we do not understand art works or their value when we decipher their meaning lying more or less hidden in the form. The truth of *War and Peace* is not Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812, even though the historical content of the novel revolves around that series of events. The novel is not a historical record of what happened during that time but a world unto itself, which must be judged in terms of its character development, pacing, dramatic intensity, and coherence. The historical content, like the language in which it is written, is the material and content from which the writer constructs the novel by arranging it not (simply) according to the order of historical events, but according to their idea of how the material is to be organized to achieve maximum evocative and intellectual effect. The “art” of novel writing consists in transforming this material and content into a story-world that takes the reader out of the ordinary world of events and into the inner, self-constituting life of the novel. As Adorno argues, “Artworks move toward the idea of a language

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, (Boston: Beacon Press), 1978, 8.

of things only by way of their own language.”⁷ Aesthetic form is therefore the language of art which distinguishes it from the mundane world. “The concept of form marks out art’s sharp antithesis to an empirical world in which art’s right to exist is uncertain.”⁸ The aesthetic form of any artwork is “the objective organization within each artwork what appears as bindingly eloquent. It is the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in the divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually an unfolding of truth.”⁹ If artistic truth is formal and not referential, what sort of truth is Adorno talking about, and what does it mean for the relationship between form and content form and matter?

Art works do not refer to the historical and social world in the way history books or commentaries on current events do. Their truth is thus a matter of their authenticity and not their accuracy. Thus, we should understand Adorno’s claim about art works as an “unfolding of truth” in the sense that we say of someone who displays the necessary properties of friendship that they are a “true” friend. The problem is made more complex in the case of art objects because no one can state in advance what formal organization will result in a true or authentic art work. The creative activity that shapes material into a work of art is not (typically) purely random: there are techniques, skills, rules to follow in order to achieve a certain effect. As Lambert Zuidervaart explains Adorno’s understanding of artistic truth, it “emerges from the interaction between the artist’s intentions and artistic materials.”¹⁰ However, unlike a manufacturing process, one can never guarantee in advance of its creation that a particular work will succeed. Above all, the authentic work of art must avoid being derivative, but how exactly

⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1997, 140.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁰ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 123.

to avoid that fate is a problem that must be solved anew every time the artist sets to work. Every genuine work of art is a concrete universal, an individual that synthesizes form and content in a unique and unrepeatable way, but is not so idiosyncratic that it cannot be recognized by others as a work of art. Thus, the genuine work of art “speaks” to viewers in a public language; it invites people in to consider what the world looks (or sounds, or reveals) from within its perspective, but it does not preach or lecture or instruct.

The work of art thus begins from an idea or an intention in the mind of the artist, from their unique sensuous experience of the world. However, the *work* of art is never simply a matter of mechanically translating ideas into material reality. Rather, the work of art is a function of struggling with the material to give it aesthetic form, a process through which the originating idea is transformed. The material dimension of the artwork resists, in a sense, the intentions of the artist. Bacon puts this crucial point clearly, as only a working artist could: “Art lies in the continual struggle to come near to the sensory side of things.”¹¹ However, although it is a struggle, the outcome is never the result of the original intentions of the artist: “You know, in my case all painting ... is an accident. I foresee it and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint.”¹² In order to create, the artist must not only have an idea and the abilities to translate those ideas into art works, they must also work with and against the material in which their idea will be embodied. Art is work because materials have their own structure and integrity that resists, in a sense, the artist’s attempt to use it to express their ideas. Paint does not just form itself into an image or figure, words do not organize themselves into verse or tones into songs. The artist must find the right word, the right tone, for the right

¹¹ Frances Bacon, “Statements, 1952-55” *Theories of Modern Art*, Herschel B. Chipp. Ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1968, 620.

¹² Frances Bacon, “Interview With David Sylvester,” 1963,” *Theories of Modern Art*, 621.

duration, apply the paint this way and not that. But applying paint this way and not that way closes off some possibilities and opens up others. One must constantly revise and choose, edit and begin again. Through this process the idea will become something other than what it was at the beginning, *because* the properties of the medium resist easy imprinting with form. Artistic truth unfolds, as Adorno says, through this back and forth with the material. The material is thus not simply a passive substance shaped like dough into whatever form the artist intends. As Guston said of creativity, “new principles arise” when the artist focuses on making the work rather than worrying about how this particular work fits into or functions within a given artistic tradition. “By new,” he adds, “I don’t mean novel, of course, but unpredictable structures arise. Chaos arises, but a very fruitful chaos.”¹³ I read “chaos” here as the unsettling of the original intention. The intention itself changes and develops as the limits and possibilities of the particular work take shape through the open-ended back and forth of creative labour.

My claim is that the resistance the unformed material provides to the artist’s attempt to impose form creates the productive chaos. By “chaos” I take Guston to be referring to the unplanned and originally unconceived, a space opened up by the fact that material cannot simply be imagined into a formal arrangement but must be *worked* into. Brown’s practice in his middle and later periods exemplifies this dialectic of conception and execution, reconsideration and revision. In Brown’s case his method of applying and scraping off is an additional visual metaphor that illustrates the open-ended back and forth which is the *work* of art. The resulting figure is not a copy of the photograph nor a picture of Brown’s thoughts but an emergent material reality created by an open-ended back and forth that obeys its own dynamic. When one

¹³ Philip Guston, *Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, Clark Coolidge, ed., , ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2011, 167-8.

tries to translate idea into material reality the material on which one works does not immediately yield: the temporal gap is at the same time a space within which the originating changes and develops. Creative works is thus as much being checked and limited by the material with which one works as it is expression and realization of an idea of how to impose aesthetic form on it. If “constraint is where one shows oneself a master,” as Goethe said, it is because the material of art does not allow itself to be formed easily into the artist’s original conception.¹⁴ Of all the possible words and word arrangements, the poet has to find the one that works as an evocation of the mood they want to establish. From all materially possible colours and arrangements, the painter has to work out the one that is most aesthetically and evocatively successful. The rules of logic govern that which it is possible to conceive, but when the hand tries to create material expressions of these ideas, it encounters resistance and the means of overcoming the recalcitrance of the material is the creative element in artistic work.¹⁵

In Brown’s case there is a second dimension to the importance of the material: his most original and important paintings could not have been composed through the application and scraping off technique had they been painted in oil on wood panels. His scraping tools would have torn canvas and acrylic paint would have reacted differently to the scraping technique. Like Bacon, Broen too could only have produced his most important works in oil, because oil “is so subtle that one tone, one piece of paint, that moves one thing into another completely changes the implications of the image.”¹⁶ That claim is even more true of Brown than Bacon, because scraping leaves literal “pieces’ of paint behind as the primary compositional force of the image.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Goethe, “Nature and Art,” 83, *Selected Poems*, John Whaley, trans., (London: John Dent), 1998.

¹⁵ Aside from his early drawings he also painted in gouache, but the works for which he is best known and whose significance will endure are all oil on wood panel.

¹⁶ Frances Bacon, “Interview With David Sylvester,” 1963,” *Theories of Modern Art*, 622.

Brown's work does not push the relationship between form and matter as far in the direction of matter as an Anselm Keifer, for whom the mixture of organic and inorganic, his efforts and found objects, is essential to the appearance and meaning of his works. He is also not interested, as the Gutai movement in Japanese art, in the aesthetic properties of paint as such. Brown did not scrape his surfaces so that one could appreciate the grain of the wood on which he painted or simply swirl and mix the paint so that we could delight in its sensuous properties in their own right. He was a maker of pictures, but pictures which his practice radically transformed from their starting point as photographic representations of real things into figures of infinite complexity and visual richness.

Brown foregrounds the *work* of art like few other visual artists of the twentieth and twenty-first century. The physical effort that making a painting requires is literally carved into his major works. Brown is the antithesis of the Greek and Romantic conceptions of creative practice. The Muse does not inspire and guide the hand and art does not imitate nature (or anything at all). At the same time, the finished work is not the product of the subjective genius of the artist. Every creative person senses and feels the world in their unique way but in order for any one to intervene in the world by creating objects that would not otherwise exist, they must work their ideas out in a struggle with material that resist their idea every step of the way. The idea itself changes and develops through the artistic labour process. Some ideas prove impossible to translate and must be abandoned, others—most—change fundamentally through the course of their materialization without ever relinquishing their connection to the starting point. Artistic work is creative precisely because the outcome is unpredictable. Even if the rules of composition can be formalized (as in a haiku or a sonnet) one cannot simply plug in content indifferently. One must find the right word, and one only knows what the right word is

when one has found it. So too the poems of Brown's painterly hand: he knew which of all possible "bindingly eloquent" arrangements of paint was the right one when he saw it.