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Painting as archeology

In the painstaking process that is **John Brown's** art making, he takes away as much paint as he applies

GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Saturday, May 12, 2001

TORONTO -- By the time you read this, the exhibition of new works by Toronto painter **John Brown** at the Olga Korper Gallery will be sold out.

While I have never believed a sales tally was any decent reflection of value or meaning, I mention it here because, in this case, it says something about the power and quality of Brown's art. For this quiet snapping-up of these gorgeous paintings on the part of a handful of serious collectors clearly had nothing about it of the mad feeding-frenzy approach to acquisition. Brown is not the sudden Next Big Thing. The collectors who purchased all of his recent output, at prices ranging from \$4,500 to \$16,000, did so with something like the assured, knowledgeable deliberation Brown himself brings to the making of the paintings. Like Brown, they know what they are doing.

As with any apparent overnight success worth celebrating, Brown's career as an artist has been, in reality, a long time in development. He was born 48 years ago in Sarnia, Ont., and grew up in Sudbury. After studying photography for a year at Humber College in Toronto, and spending another year wandering through Europe, he settled in Toronto in 1977, where he began to paint seriously. He's been painting steadily now for about 25 years.

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What do **John Brown's** paintings look like?

Because they are so physical, so material-driven, so devoid of anecdote or narrative, they're hard to describe. Brown paints with oils (sometimes with additions of glue, gold leaf and thick gobs of paint scrapings from his floor) on wooden panels. Most of the new paintings are bigger than his past works (about six feet by six feet is the favoured size). They're abstractions. Or, if the paintings can be said to contain images, those images are vestigial, subliminal, suspended somewhere deep within the surface -- like woolly mammoths frozen in ice under your feet. He is given to fleshy pinks, ivories, light blues, creamy yellows, earthy browns and blacks -- all distressed, eroded, born and broken and reborn. The final colour in his paintings is colour that has prevailed, colour that has weathered the storms of Brown's endless decision-making.

Given the blown, scoured *Sturm und Drang* of his paintings, you might imagine Brown's capacious downtown studio to be the site of a certain heady derangement, ground zero of a purposeful chaos. Not at all. His palette is, resourcefully, a long glass-topped coffee table on wheels. Fat tubes of paint are piled carefully on an adjacent table. Yellowing photographs from newspapers and magazines -- source photos for his paintings -- are pinned to the walls. There are lots and lots of books and what appears to be about a thousand CDs. "Sometimes I think I make paintings," Brown says, grinning his extremely affable grin, "just so I can buy books and music."

Leaning against one wall of his studio are three unfinished paintings Brown has been contemplating -- and taking an occasional swipe at -- for years. "Painting is a slow thing to learn," he insists. Slow to learn and slow to do. One of the paintings in the current show, for example, has been in the works since 1986.

"Paintings are made up close," he says, "carefully, with small brushes, and not with broad motions of the arm or the whole body." No slashing, stabbing, abstract-expressionist fervour for **John Brown**. For him, painting is a kind of archeology, where surfaces are carefully laid bare, explored, adjusted, scraped away and replaced. It is therefore not so much an expressive act as it is an almost

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Morning Smile

The best description of the Clinton presidency might well be "sex between the Bushes."

- Richard H. Bittner

inexpressible act.

Add to that the fact that he takes away as much paint as he puts on. "Olga [Korper] says I make paintings backwards," he says with a laugh. And so his paintings end up being big, glorious, saved remnants, residual planes of colour and shape and texture that he has somehow assisted into being.

Where the paintings actually come from is equally mysterious. For one thing, Brown likes to edge into them, approaching them obliquely so they don't know he's coming. "I start out pretty randomly," he says, "sometimes beginning with a block of colour I've placed somewhere on the surface -- or I'll start doing something in one corner." It helps him if the still-undiscovered painting already has a title, often one that comes from his broad and continual reading (his new paintings, which are called either *Grimm* paintings or *Grimm Grimmiger Grimmless* paintings, derive their titles not from the Grimm of fairy-tale fame, but rather from the sound of, the linguistic fragrance of, Samuel Beckett, a writer Brown loves profoundly). Then he can, as he puts it, "work towards that title."

Found images too are potent beacons in Brown's artistic process. He based one of his recent paintings -- a painting that is mostly yellow now, but began life mostly red -- on a stereoscopic view of the anatomized human body, culled from a five-volume set published more than a century ago in Edinburgh. Another began with a magazine photograph of a plane crash in Russia ("the orange uniforms of the emergency workers informed the painting").

If this doesn't make much sense to anyone who is not **John Brown**, that's okay. "I look at these pictures out of the corner of my eye as I work," he told me. "They're in my peripheral vision." I pause for a moment trying to imagine how this would work. He looks momentarily quizzical. "Well, you have to cling on to *something*," he laughs.

We're working up to one of those really dumb questions that, in the case of Brown, I can't keep myself from putting to him. "How do you know when a painting is finished?" He smiles that affable smile. "I'm done when I can remember the images I

started with," he replies. Which is precisely the kind of inscrutable answer the question deserves. *John Brown's work is at the Olga Korper Gallery, 17 Morrow Ave., Toronto, until May 30. Call 416-538-8220.*

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