



John Brown, *July 23, 2037, 2005-2006*, oil on panel, 86 x 74"

## Grace and Travail

**The Paintings of John Brown at Olga Korper in Toronto  
by Gary Michael Dault**

Not the least of the defining characteristics of these seven beautiful new works by Toronto-based painter John Brown – they were on exhibition at Toronto's Olga Korper Gallery from August 31 until September 30 – is the presence within each of them of two kinds of color in contention: a distressed, blistered, rough-hewn cream or beige (frequently employed as a ground) and a warm but sometimes disturbingly carnal brick red, a sanguine-red the color of dried blood,

usually employed as some kind of figure against the receptiveness of tracts of cream-beige.

There are other colours there as well: earthy, tar-like blacks, for example, and greys and bits of residual green and orange and blue. But these expressive, galvanizing flecks, bits of jewel-like strokes and swipes of pigment, mica-like flecks, are everywhere subsumed by the strange, desert-floor-ness of each painting's weathered field.

Brown says he works on more

than one painting at a time – indeed he says that for this exhibition, he worked on all seven at once. This is not a way of speeding things up, but, rather, a way, paradoxically, of further slowing them down. And the paintings do take forever to make.

John Brown is a virtuoso of slowness. He applies oil pigments to his big boards and then carefully sands them off again. He adds pigment and then scratches it away. He sands and scratches. He scrapes on the pigment and then scrapes it off again, using what he refers to as his "good industrial, scrapers with carbide edges" that he says are far more important to him than brushes (he confessed ruefully, when I was talking to him recently, that he scraped away so much pigment that "there must be about \$3000 worth of oil paint on the studio floor"). He scratches at his surfaces, sometimes with a nail (he used to use a nail all the time), but now more likely with the edges of the scrapers. It sometimes looks as if he has scratched at them with his fingernails, desperate. The scrapers mean a lot. They are hallowed tools: they give and they take away. And in their taking away is released that residual sense of pictorial experience, that sense of a visuality left behind – which is a survival experience of looking, visuality played out on the vista of the flayed eye, on the retina-as-elemental-plane.

What happens as subject, as incident, a scenario, in a John Brown painting? The pictures seem to be positioned somewhere between geology and theatre. In each of them, there are intractable stretches of surface. Onto these surfaces there have been introduced certain pictorial events – one might almost think of them as figure-like, pigmented coagulations of paint.

In *July 23, 2037*, for example, there is a pinkish, flesh-colored structure that occupies the middle ground of the picture and looks a little like a weather vane or like some kind of instrument of measurement. The

structure thrusts up vertically from the bottom of the painting, and bears or carries seven small florets or flags or bird-like excrescences of the brick-coloured pigment of which Brown seems so fond. These seven bounded, detachable, painted things seem, at first, to be depicted objects, figures on a ground, but a closer look at them reveals that they are as fully integrated into the painting's weathered and distressed ground as any other part of the picture. Which then works to curtail the object-like meaning they were beginning to have (as florets, flags, and so on).

And so Brown's painted objects and incidents are essentially chimeras, points on his maps of misreading. But this idea is, in turn, itself subverted by the formal persuasiveness of these very painted and imposed "objects." And so the push-pull, figure-ground pushing and shoving goes on, the confrontation between incident and the incident's abstraction winding down, in the end, to an exhausting kind of rippling, lurching pigmented field, where incidents rise from their grounds and melt back into them again.

Usually Brown's figure-like "incidents" are less specified than the "weather vane" in *July 23, 2037*. In the strange and wondrous *May 4, 2064*, for example, the only "figure" in the painting is a strange, ruddy, L-shaped configuration hovering near the painting's center. It looks like a crank, or a sausage or a desiccated limb. It's made of intense strokes of rusty paint and the closer you get to it, the more it both dissolves (it's made of a hundred colors) and, at the same time, tightens into a sinew as strong as a tree root. In other paintings, in *July 8, 2046*, for example, and in *November 14, 2077*, there are fewer incidents and more continental drift: where great slabs of painted material nervously share the picture-plane with other great neurasthenic shapes.

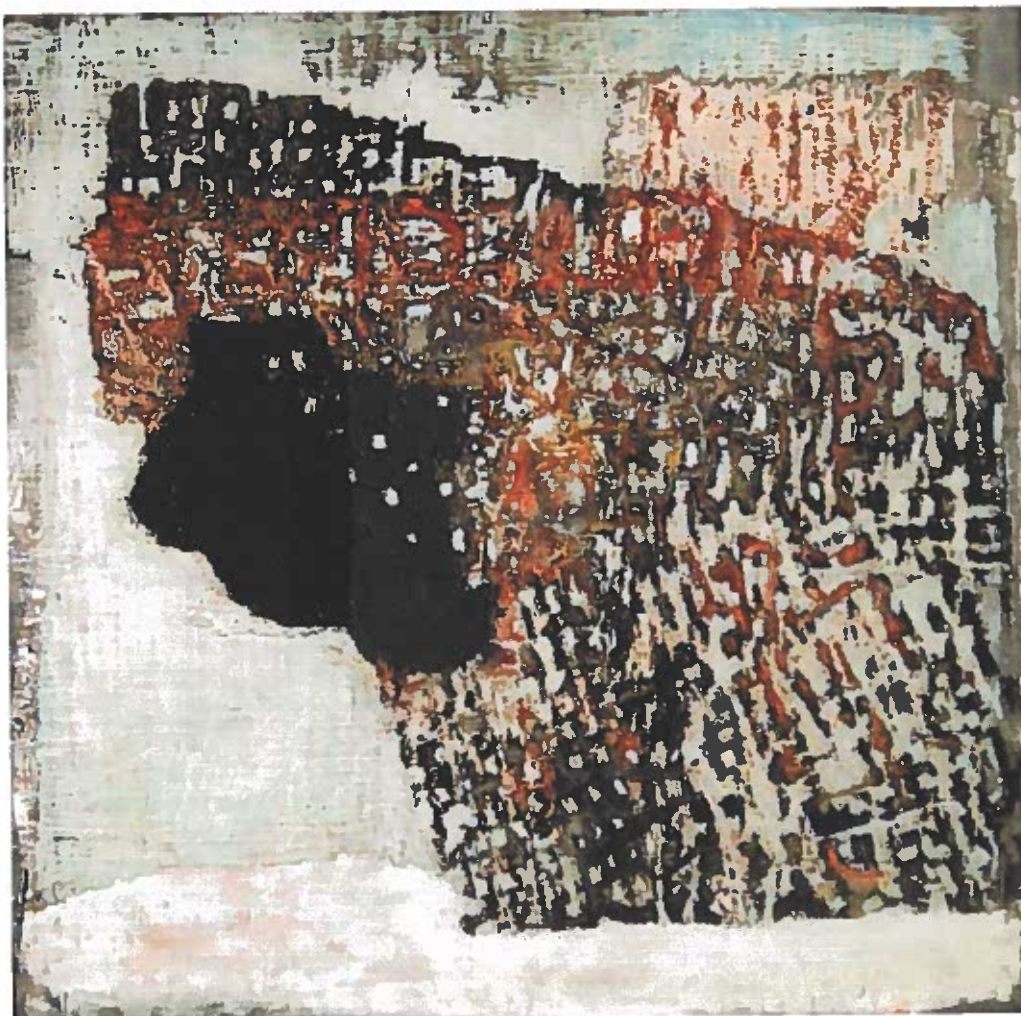
Where do these ambiguous, problematic incidents and drifting shapes come from? Apparently they

develop over time. They evolve. They are eroded into being. Brown says he often begins a painting with a photograph. By which he doesn't mean that he tries to reproduce a photograph on the wood panel he's painting on, but rather that, by having recourse to a photo in a book (one of his favourite and most frequently used books is an old anatomy textbook, complete with stereoscopic slides, which was published sometime around 1915. Brown says that one of the photos in this book shows the "chest cavity opened up", and so he began one of the paintings in the exhibition by beginning to block out the "darks and lights" of that excavated chest – not anatomically, but in terms of the disposition of its densities in space.

What does Brown like about the

spatial ambiguities resulting from the scraping and scratching and sanding of the surfaces of his paintings? Scraping, he once told me, takes the painting out of your hands: "It takes the authorship out of it." Scraping and sanding and scratching and gouging all contribute to an erasing of the artist's often fetishized "handwriting". "Erasing," Brown notes, "gets rid of the signature stroke". He once told me that he was after "a certain level of clumsiness" in his work. Erasing and distressing open the doors to this kind of disaffected painting: they help to activate an early warning signal against any approach of slickness.

"I don't make conceptual paintings", Brown insists, "nor do I make abstract paintings. I don't know



John Brown, *July 8, 2046, 2005-2006*, oil on panel, 62 x 62"

anything about abstraction", he once confided to me, with a certain amount of wicked glee. "My goal", he says, "is to make paintings. And paintings are visceral, not conceptual." And so, I ask him, if you are not busy assisting a concept to closure, or rendering any particular shard of reality more abstract than it first appears to be, how do you know when a painting is finished? His answer is maddeningly enigmatic and exuberantly private: "I ask myself, does the thing look right?" And it always does.

The titles of the paintings are, as you will have noticed, strange. Their titles, which are dates merely, and speak to number and chronology, would be non-poetic were it not for the fact that each of them is, poetically, a future date.

Why? Part of the explanation comes, Brown feels, from his admiration for an etching by James Ensor from 1888 called *My Portrait in 1960*. It shows a skeleton, reclining in a divan. "I adore that etching", Brown says. But the artist's future-think is about more than the poignancy of a future without us.

It takes time to make a painting – lots of time, in Brown's case. And the time invested in the making of each work is, for Brown, an acknowledgement that there actually may be a future. On the other hand, the titles, he tells me, are "empty markers." As such, they are set in a future that really doesn't seem to mean anything very real to us: "the titles are partly about how a-historical we have become," he says. As a culture, we are so narcissistic, we cannot allow ourselves to think much about aging and death. In fact, we are a death-dealing culture that turns its back on its own sinister proclivities (we are, for example, always at war), preferring instead to bury our heads in the endless sands of diversion, entertainment, sentimentality and forced forgetfulness. Against which ruin, John Brown has shored these cranky, magnificent paintings. "Every painting, all painting", Brown says, "is optimistic. Any act of creation is about hope."



Above: John Brown, May 3, 2064, 2005-2006, oil on panel, 72 x 84"

Below: John Brown, November 14, 2077, 2005-2006, oil on panel, 74 x 74"

