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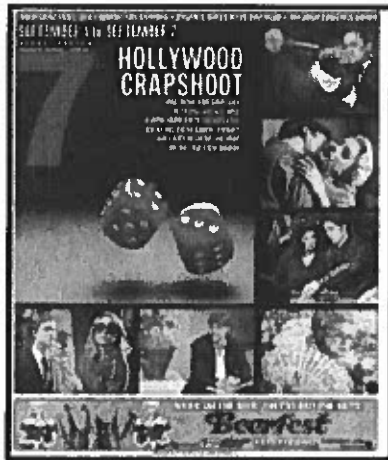
John Brown's

Oct. 13, 2082

To Sept. 30 at the Olga Korper Gallery. 17 Morrow Ave., 416-538-8220.

John Brown's latest exhibition, now at the Olga Korper Gallery, is perhaps the veteran, Toronto-based painter's finest to date. There are only seven works in the show, and all seven are superb -- big oil paintings on wood in which Brown's pale yet strangely earthy colours shimmer and breathe in a way that is almost indecently absorbing and, thereafter, quite inexplicably moving.

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The painting shown here is titled, rather oddly, *Oct. 13, 2082*. Although "painting" is a rather tricky term to use in this case. For while Brown does assuredly cover his big wooden panels with pigment, he actually spends more time distressing the paint than he does applying it. His paintings are not so much the product of his labours so much as they are the survivors of it.

I ask him how he begins. I ask, for example, if he draws. "On the canvas?" he replies, as if this were a truly outlandish idea. Yeah.

"No," says Brown, "but I do start making marks on it." But not the kind of marks you'd imagine. "I often begin the paintings with old photos", he tells me. "*Oct. 13, 2082* began, for example, with a photo from an anatomy book published around 1915. In one of the photos, the chest cavity is opened up, and I just began the painting by using the light and dark areas of the chest."

Although, he adds, when you come right down to it, *Oct. 13, 2082*, with its strange, grey, apparently industrially fabricated "base," over which there delicately hovers an odd bundle of scintillating grey and coral bits of something or other, was more direct than some of the other, more tortured paintings: "That one didn't go through so much," he adds.

And they do go through a lot. "I'm a very reactive painter," Brown says. He says he builds his paintings up and then tears them apart. "It sounds like two dogs pulling on a bone," I say. "It's like that," Brown agrees cheerfully. Except that he's both dogs.

There's not much brushwork in a John Brown. But there's a lot of scraping ("I use good industrial scrapers with carbide blades"), and scratching ("I used to use a nail, but now I use the edges of the scrapers"). I ask him about this paroxysm of upheaval his paintings always seem to go through. "I think it removes some of the authorship from the act of painting," he says.

I'm trying for a certain level of clumsiness," Brown admits. Scraping the surface, he says, is "like glazing it without the glaze." And to what end? "It creates a layering," he tells me, "and depth. It generates a surface that traps light and from which light slowly and inexorably emerges.

"Aren't you going to ask me about the titles?" he says. Well, yes, I was just about to (all the paintings bear titles that are dates in the future). "For one thing, I adore that etching by James Ensor from 1888 called *My Portrait in 1960*, showing a reclining skeleton, and it probably grew out of that. But also, it takes time to make a painting [lots of time in Brown's case]. And each painting therefore inherently promises that there may actually be a future. Any act of creation," Brown continues, "is optimistic. Any act of creation is about hope."
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EXHIBIT A: JOHN BROWN'S *OCT.13, 2082.*

Note: titles are surrounded by asterisks

John Brown's latest exhibition, now at the Olga Korper Gallery, is perhaps the veteran, Toronto-based painter's finest to date. There are only seven works in the show, and all seven are superb—big oil paintings on wood in which Brown's pale yet strangely earthy colours shimmer and breathe in a way that is almost indecently absorbing and, thereafter, quite inexplicably moving.

The painting shown here is titled, rather oddly, **Oct.13, 2082.** Although "painting" is a rather tricky term to use here. For while Brown does assuredly cover his big wooden panels with pigment, he actually spends more time distressing the paint than he does applying it. His paintings are not so much the product of his labours so much as they are the survivors of it.

"I worked on all seven of the paintings at the same time", Brown tells me, on the phone from his home—where I have interrupted him in the course of his preparing dinner (he loves cooking, which, he says, is a lot like painting).

I ask him how he begins. I ask, for example, if he draws. "On the canvas?" he replies, as if this were a truly outlandish idea. Yeh. "No", says Brown, "But I do start making marks on it". But not the kind of marks you'd imagine. "I often begin the paintings with old photos", he tells me. "**October 13, 2082** began, for example, with a photo from an anatomy book published around 1915. In one of the photos, the chest cavity is opened up, and I just began the painting by using the light and dark areas of the chest."

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There’s not much brushwork in a John Brown. But there’s a lot of scraping (“I use good industrial scrapers with carbide blades”), and scratching (“I used to use a nail, but now I use the edges of the scrapers”). I ask him about this paroxysm of upheaval his paintings always seem to go through. “I think it removes some of the authorship from the act of painting”, he says. Scraping takes the surface of the painting out of your hands. It erases the signature stroke, all evidence of the artist’s “handwriting”. “I’m trying for a certain level of clumsiness”, Brown admits. Scraping the surface, he says, is “like glazing it without the glaze”. And to what end? “It creates a layering”, he tells me, “and depth. It generates a surface that traps light and from which light slowly and inexorably emerges.

“My goal”, Brown says, “is simply to make a painting”. Yes. “And painting is visceral”. Yes, for sure. “And you feel it when you get there.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me about the titles?” he says. Well, yes, I was just about to (all the paintings bear titles that are dates set in the future—such as *Oct.13, 2082*). “For one thing, I adore that etching by James Ensor from 1888 called *My Portrait in 1960*, showing a reclining skeleton, and it probably grew out of that. But also, it takes time to make a painting” [lots of time in Brown’s case]. And each painting therefore inherently promises that there may actually be a future. Any act of creation”, Brown continues, “is optimistic. Any act of creation is about hope”.

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