

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

'Erasing, for me, is really a form of drawing'

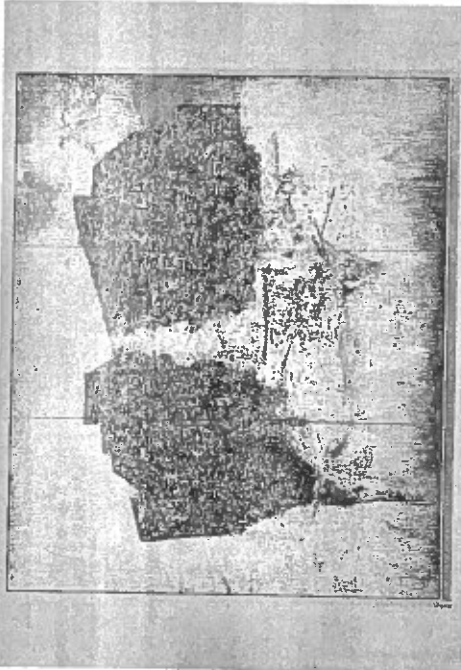
John Brown rubs and scrapes, scratches and sands his paintings. What lies beneath is masterful

BY GARY MICHAEL DAULT

John Brown is clearly one of this country's greatest painters — a fact now being honoured by the mounting of a large and almost indecently delicious exhibition of his work by Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA). The exhibition, curated by MOCCA director David Liss, is not really a survey or a retrospective, but rather a judicious selection of the Toronto-based painter's best work from the past 20 years. As Liss notes in the museum's press release: "It became clear to me that as a thematic approach, such as a survey or chronology, would be a disservice that might restrict the breadth, scope and true value of John's practice." And breadth, scope and value it assuredly has.

The exhibition, Brown's first museum exhibition in two decades, is called *The Visceral Thing*. The title, though a tad ungainly, is well chosen when you consider what Brown's paintings actually look like. For Brown, the act of painting has always been a deep, bodily activity, predicated as much upon distressing a picture's surface as decorating it.

Take a painting like the gigantic *Towerversionone* (which is 30 by 12 feet). The work is dated 2006-08, probably because Brown worked on it off and on all during that time. He does that. He can keep paintings going for years. And because of that, he often works on a lot of them at once, including each one laboriously toward completion. *Towerversionone*, like others of his paintings, is built on a central painterly paradox: A virtuoso of slowness, Brown is a prolific maker of what might be termed strategic "delays in paint." Brown first



John Brown worked on *Towerversionone* for two years, inching it toward completion. OGA ROPER GALLERY

applies his oil pigments to the big wooden panels he works on (he seems to need the resistance wood provides, in contrast to the springiness of canvas) — and then rubs and scrapes and scratches and sands them off again (he forswears brushes, preferring instead "good industrial scrapers with carbide edges.") As a result of this willed weathering, this deliberate and controlled erosion that simultaneously subverts and creates their surfaces, Brown's paintings look like archaeological sites, where each revelation has turned out to be deep, rather than wide. His paintings invariably appear, at first, to be normally composed, to offer subjects. Even the noble *Towerversionone*, for example, a highly abstract picture that appears to partake equally of the realms of geology and theatre, posits two huge, red-orange,

blob-like, roughly textured entities in confrontation, one of them trailing a gnarled appendage that splutters down through the picture's creamy, stucco-like ground to look off finally, at the painting's bottom.

So the painting does indeed have a subject, even if it's something general and abstract like "two-ness." But is its "subject" the source of the great satisfaction it gives? Clearly not. The joy of the painting lies in the majesty of its making, in the slow eroding, continental drift of its earthy ("visceral") elements, in the lurching of one coloured mass toward (or away from) another, in the blistered, rough-hewn, almost masticated surfaces that so vividly offer the viewer a record of their own making. Brown's paintings are like giant footprints in the sand: Pay attention and you can fig-

ure out both where he's been, and where he's going. One of the pleasures afforded by *The Visceral Thing* is the chance to see (or see again) some of the artist's earlier paintings — most of which now reside either in museums or private collections.

A cursory look at some of them — like his *A Delicate Family* (12 Attempts to Paint a Human Face) or his *Human Head* paintings, all from the late 1960s and early nineties — might lead you to believe that Brown saw himself, basically, as a figurative painter, striving, like every other figure painter, to fabricate a likeness. Inspect these dark, moody, troubling heads more closely, however, and you will see the current John Brown in nascent form — struggling with the paint, both honouring and abusing the picture's surface, creating an image and obliterating it again — all in the obsessive pursuit of a larger, finer, infinitely more memorable image than mere likeness could ever hope to provide.

Brown used to speak about his flagrant worrying of his pictures' surfaces as a means of "erasing the authorship" of the work — no small task for a painter as unique as Brown is.

Scraping and sanding, scratching and gouging his paintings, he would claim — he once told me there was probably about \$2,000 worth of residual oil paint on his studio floor — was his way of generating "a certain kind of clumsiness," and therefore, a way of getting rid of what he once called "the signature stroke," the artist's identifiable "handwriting."

Lately, he has modified his position a bit. "I've decided that erasing, for me, is really a form of drawing," Brown said on the phone a couple of days ago. "It makes the painting more transparent and creates a sort of veil over the field of visual noise that constitutes each work."

After all, he added, "the erasing and distressing of the surfaces of my paintings has now become my signature or trademark." May, as well, bow to inevitability. And as for Brown's anecdotes about subverting any hint of virtuosity in his painting, well, it's too late for that, too, John Brown's mastery is now a fact of Canadian art history, and he may as well learn to enjoy it.

John Brown: *The Visceral Thing* runs at MOCCA, 952 Queen St. W., Toronto, until April 20 (416-395-0887).