

The Grimm Anomaly

Between 1997 and his death in 2020 Brown painted at least 97 small paintings named Grimm, after the surname of the authors of the famous collection of fairy tales.¹ The series plays on the ambiguity of their name sake: in English, the word “grim” connotes a dire outlook or prognosis, and the content of many of the fairy takes are dark and violent. At the same time, they are children’s stories meant to guide and teach, not terrify. They are fairy tales, not documentaries; their villains as comic as they are sinister, Brown’s Grimm paintings also sometimes plumb the same darkness as the later paintings that I discussed in “The Architecture of Dread” and studies in the infirmities and vulnerabilities of mortal life are not hard to find. Nevertheless, judged as a whole, I will argue that the Grimm series is anomalous because it elevates the comic over the tragic dimension of life. There will be wounds, failures, and losses in every life and there are forces opposed to joy, but once we accept these realities, laughter can have the final word in the trial of life’s value.

Not every painting is openly comic or an obvious expression of brown’s own sardonic and mischievous sense of humour. Many, as we will see, are, but the lighter emotional tone of the series is also conveyed by their varying modes of composition. Most of the Grimm’s are painted without the sever scarping down technique which came to define Brown’s work to the

¹ The series consists of 97 numbered paintings Grimms. Of those 97 I have photographic records of 79. I also have photographs of 16 paintings which strongly resemble Grimms, but since the photographs were unlabelled I have listed them in the archive as likely but not definitively Grimms. I had resigned myself to never being able to completely catalogue the Grimms but the 2026 show at Olga Korper’s included two Grimms that I had not previously been able to catalogue. I am thus now more hopeful that further research will allow my to expand the number of definitively identified Grmms. I should also note that there are also five larger paintings that include the appellation “Grimm.” I have not discussed these larger paintings in the context of the Grimm anomaly because they lack the snapshot quality that I think is essential to the paintings in the series.

exclusion of attention to his ability to construct by other means. The Grimms are (for the most part) less heavily worked than most of his mature paintings, less eroded, less constructed by removal and scraping down of paint and, as a consequence, less marked by the anxieties that the building up-scraping down embody. Many have an unfinished look to them, in defiance of Brown's well-known tendency to keep painting until the eve of a show. Others are almost purely abstract, while the images ones that are heavily worked are built up through dense agglomerations of paint that give them a sculptural dimension.

The series is also anomalous in terms of the size of the paintings. While Brown had worked on smaller surfaces in series like *12 Attempts to Paint a Human Face (For Sandra Carpenter)* his work following *Human Heads* was dominated by the challenge of working on larger scales. Therefore, the *Grimm Series* stands out as anomalous in terms of scale as well. None of the 96 Grimm's are larger than 2x2. This scale is also significant in terms of how each painting can be read as part of the series. Looking at the Grimms always reminds me of the hundreds of Polaroid snapshots that Brown took when he gathered friends and family. While Brown studied photography before he turned to painting and employed photographs as the source material for the images of his mature work, his Polaroid snapshots were pure fun. Even after phones came equipped with cameras Brown continued to use his later model Polaroid at dinner parties or gatherings for drinks.² Brown's mature work regularly acknowledged the importance of family, friends, and lovers in his work: the aforementioned *Twelve Attempts to Paint a Human Face (for Sandra Carpenter)* are important examples, as are the names of the paintings in a 20... show: *J.B's leg*, *H.S.'s Eye*, *R.G's Heart*. For Brown, the personal was the painterly, but

² I began to think of the connection between the Grimm series and Brown's love of Polaroids when I discovered a box full of dozens of old snapshots when closing his studio following his death in 2020.

the painterly was not an attempt to render the particularities of the people whom he loved and valued but rather occasions to acknowledge their value in his life: gifts, but not only to the person, but to everyone who sees them. It is thus perhaps ironic to read the Grimm series as somehow connected to the Polaroids because none of the 96 Grimm's are in any obvious way connected to the direct representation of family or friends. Nevertheless, the Grimm's remind me of those Polaroids. They were attempts to preserve memory by objectifying it glossy colour images the camera would print out. The small size of the pictures meant that much was left out of frame: what one was left with was smiling, laughing people. Most of the Grimms do not present smiling laughing people, but they all leave much out of frame. Neither Polaroids nor paintings can capture time: people die, landscapes change, colours fade, and those truths are grim(m), but the snapshots preserve the original happiness and allow it to be doubled in the memory of the events recorded in the pictures. The Grimm series strikes me as analogous efforts not to stop time from passing, but to carve out significant moments for preservation and pleasurable review.

But my reading of this series as 'anomalous' has more to do with the playful feel of the paintings and not their method of composition or size. While there is nothing childlike about his *oeuvre's* preoccupation with the liability to disease and damage of damage material, mortal bodies, Brown himself retained the child's love of mischief, teasing, and laughter. That side of his personality is on full display here. That does not mean that Brown was aiming at anything in particular with these paintings: he did not compose them to elicit smiles, or return people to the idylls of childhood or to give vent to his comic impulses. Paintings are not therapy sessions that shine light on the inner life of the painter: they are things of the world once they have been completed and hung in a gallery. That said, they originate from the emotionally and

intellectually filtered responses of the artist to the world. Works can express aspects of the emotional life of the artist without the work itself being reducible to illustrations of conscious intentions. That is, if creations betrayed nothing of the person who painted or wrote or danced or sculpted, all art would be illustration or empirical description of the object of experience. But in all artistic work the object is not a function of empirical description but translation via the medium of the artist's interpretive relationship to the content. Representations of the same "thing" will vary between artists because they are differently situated in relation to the object represented. In the case of the Grimm series, I do not think that Brown was trying to tell jokes or raise a smile or tell the world about his comic sensibilities. Still, I have no doubt that he called this series "Grimm" because he wanted to play with the ambiguous connotations of "Grimm" that I noted above.

Considered in the context of art history the Grimm series plays with the conventions of both landscape and portraiture. Whereas the classic landscape typically frames scenes of clichéd natural beauty: mountains in the distance, lush sylvan expanses, fields overflowing with grain—Brown's version presents us with harsh promontories and boulders in "unnatural" colours set amidst fiery backgrounds and halos of lighter shading that concentrate the viewer's attention on the scale, the power, and the indifference of natural objects to human time scales. The framing effects he employs and which I will discuss in more detail below distance the viewer from the central figures: we are not drawn into the landscapes but see it as if through a window or camera lens from a safe distance, enjoying the desiccated beauty while feeling secure in the fact that we are not *there*.

The portrait-like Grimm's have the opposite effect and (a few) stand out in the history of Brown's work for the tenderness with which they handle the "sitter." The Human Head Series

also played with the conventions of portraiture, but their massive scale and heavily worked surfaces obliterated the class position and power normally associated with formal portraits. If the Heads are not angry they are certainly harsh, the image built up by scraping or smearing away almost all traces of individuality and signs of social power. As we will see, the Grimm portraits vary considerably in compositional style, but the most obviously portrait-like are simply drawn faces of men with clear features unobscured by any heavy brushwork. They continue Brown's concern with the emotional valences of the face and body and strip away obvious signs of power and position but many have a cartoonish quality that insists on the comedic core of life.

I have risked sorting the 97 Grimm's into four thematically and stylistically defined groups. As we will see the risk is real: Brown did not like classifications of any sort, in art or life. He considered the Grimm's a single, undivided, on-going project. Nevertheless, to permit a more coherent discussion as much as anything else I have divided the Grimm's into four sets: 1) Organic, Geological, and Architectural Forms, 2) Body Parts, 3) Non-figurative Abstractions, and 4) Portraits. Brown's embrace of ambiguity means that many of the paintings could fit in more than one category and the first category could be divided into three categories, one for each type of form. I have decided against that division both because I want to emphasise the importance of shape to the paintings of that set and because I did not want to multiply categories and risk undermining the point of classifying them. Readers are free to contest these classifications or construct their own or reject the efficacy of even trying to create subsets. The sorting into subsets is based on family resemblance and not uncontested objective properties of the paintings. I hope that the classifications help create an economy of attention productive of clearer seeing the distribution of technics and motifs across the 96 paintings. But paintings, like people—who can also be sorted and grouped—are in truth singularities. If the classifications

help concentrate attention on each painting by highlighting its similarities to some and differences from others then it will have served its purpose. If they do not, they can easily be disregarded.

I: Organic, Geological, and Architectural Forms

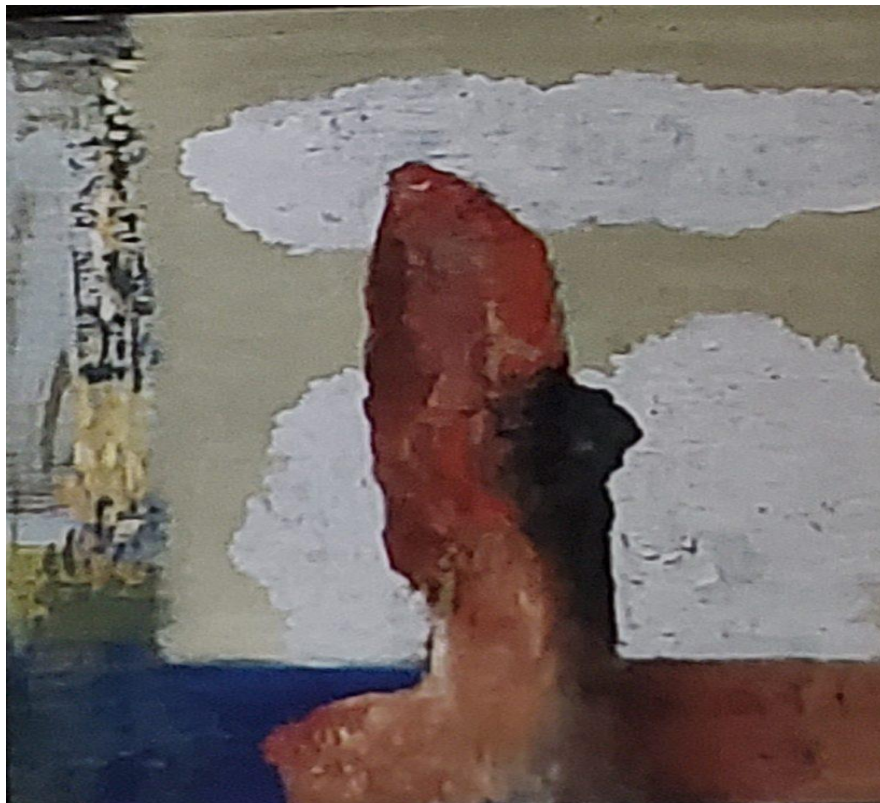
The first Grimm was a small (20x22) oil on panel completed in 1997. Two figures float in space, flesh coloured but not human: they are pill-shaped but the flesh tones in which they are painted and their rounded shape evoke something living, perhaps bacteria under very high magnification. Brown is not illustrating anything but he clearly wants the viewer to concentrate attention on the forms: they are framed from above by an almost uniformly black background which contrasts sharply with a grey-beige field of paint that fills the lower half of the surface. The figures stand out distinctly against this bifurcated background as the centre of attention. But any resemblance to anything actual or any connotations the figures might evoke in viewers are a tease: Brown does not draw our gaze there so that we can ponder and draw conclusions about what the figures are. True to the “snapshot” quality of the Grimm’s that I mentioned above we Grimm one captures a dynamic situation in a single moment of time and invites us to take pleasure in the captured image. The light that seems to emanate from within the floating, supple, almost three-dimensional forms, suggest life and their gravity-defining levitation suggests a moment of freedom from being tied down to the ground, from serving a definite purpose or following an imposed vector. Grimm 1 sets the compositional tone for the rest of the series. Almost all the Grimm’s centre their figures in uniformly painted backgrounds that are relatively unworked (there is little scuffing down of paint to create the fractal-like effects in the larger total paintings) so that the viewer’s gaze can tarry with the foregrounded object. They work

with a conventional relationship between figure and ground although the figures are often fantastical and without clear referent in the objective world.



Grimm #1 (1997), Oil on Wood, 20×22

If Grimm 1 is light Grimm 2 is heavy. While it rises up it does so as a butte or mesa does above the desert floor rather than float teasingly in space like the figures of Grimm 1. The figure appears chiselled, exposed to the elements, eroded by wind, but firmly grounded and stoic against the disintegrative effects of time. Grimm # 2 is the first of the “landscape” Grimms, but resembles Grimm 1 in also being snapshot-like: a tourist picture snapped quickly out of the window of the family sedan, but this judgment is a response to what the painting perhaps suggests, not what it “is.”



Grimm #2 (1997) Oil on Wood 20x22

The figure is no more an illustration of something out of Monument Valley or the Roadrunner and Coyote cartoons than the figures in # 1 are illustrations of an electron micrograph of bacteria. But both could be either, setting the stage for the playfulness and ambiguity that course throughout the entire series of 96 Grimms could be either. As one looks more carefully a gestalt-shift occurs and the figure appears bird-like: the black protuberance looks like a beak, but there is no body attached to the head but instead the figure melts and spreads out along the ground. But then the landscape reading re-asserts itself: the spire is set out clearly against in terra cotta tones against as dull beige backgrounded intersected by two white pillowy forms that it is difficult to not think of as clouds. The figure rises from a same-coloured ground to the viewer's right that ends in a pool of blue to the left. The paint of the extreme left border has been

dissolved with turpentine to produce a band of thin, running paint which serves as a foil against which the figure achieves added solidity. Although the figure in # 1 has an organic form and that of # 2 geological, the paintings are similar in that they tease the viewer to connect the figures to analogues that they almost certainly do not have.

Grimm # 8 is the first of the “architectural” members of this subset. In it a central structure- a watchtower, the cupola of a cathedral? – painted in muted orange tones stands out against another cloud-like formation. But what is happening beneath the dome? Bands of red paint streak outward against a white background like light waves. But they extend from beneath the structure, not the top, as they would if the structure were a lighthouse. A field of white surrounds the central structure. Brown again deploys a uniformly painted, simple background to help the viewer resolve the figure more sharply. But then once we do that another gestalt-shift occurs analogous to what happens in Grimm 2. The longer one examines the figure the more monstrous it appears. Is the cupola-like structure anchored to the bedrock or does it merge organically with it. Is the cupola the figure or is it the figure some fantastical creature whose head the cupola and whose body is the orange-blue red lower form, a snail’s foot or even some sort of skirt and the emanation something the figure is intentionally emitting.³ The painting provokes these opposed readings. Such provocation abound throughout the Grimm series and underline my claim that there is, overall, a playfulness to the Grimm’s mostly absent in any other series of Brown’s paintings or works on paper.

³ Compare the chicken like figure in Grimm 32, which I will discuss below.



Grimm #8 (1997), Oil on Wood, 24.25×26.25

Grimm 15 is an excellent example of the range of Brown's practice and a caution against reducing Brown to the scraping-down, construction by removal technique. Especially in his later work Brown often composed by layering paint or allowing images to appear from almost delicate, crosshatch brushwork. Whereas the scraped paintings achieve their unique complexity through the unintentional emergence of complex intersecting lines and flecks of left-over paint, paintings like Grimm 15 achieve a different complexity through added texture and blurring of lines between figure and background. The figure in Grimm 15 initially appears organic but Grimm 15 is another example of the ambiguity found throughout the series. A jellyfish like organism barely distinguishes itself from the background, but no sooner does the viewer resolve the image than questions arise: the red and flesh tones connote a living creature, but is it a

creature or a pathological growth, a tumour, perhaps. red figure is framed by the same sort of flesh tones as found in Grimm 1. But that reading is immediately contested if one focuses on the tentacle-like protuberances that dangle beneath the dome-shaped “head” of the figure. There is something grotesque about Grimm 15 to be sure, but disgust when the figure is viewed as a creature and not a growth. When we view the figure that way it seems at home in its element and not a damaging mutation. Looking at a brown composition always requires work on the part of the viewer: more complexity and ambiguity appears the more one concentrates. The painting is not a fixed and finished thing but repays attention in ever-new ways.



Grimm #15 (1997), Oil on Wood, 28.25×24.25

The figures in Grimm 25 remind the viewer of the pill-like forms of Grimm 1, but there are important differences. The tops of the floating figures are rounded and sensuous, but the

bottoms are flattened, suggesting a built structure rather than evolved organic form. One of the figures seems to sit on solid ground (Brown includes a horizon line), while the other appears to have levitated and rotated 90 degrees. Unlike Grimm 1, the structures do not intersect or merge although the rotation of the one figure in the direction of the other suggests some sort of intentional movement, although this suggestion was not likely intended by Brown. He always referred to the figures as “haystacks,” and while he should not be understood to be speaking literally, he also probably did not think of the two figures as standing in a communicative relationship. If Grimm 15 flirted with the grotesque, Grimm 25 restores the purely playful feel that I believe pervades the series taken as a whole. There is nothing serious going on here at all, but there is something perhaps amusing about a solid substance suddenly cutting itself free from the earth and rotating in space.

But Grimm 25 is most noteworthy for another reason. It is also the first Grimm to employ a double-framing technique with the background, a practice that will recur in a number of later Grimms. This effect, in which a lighter-toned halo of paint frames the figure and is in turn framed by a darker surrounding makes it seem as if we are viewing the scene as through a window, or perhaps better some tear in the fabric of space that gives us access to a scene that would otherwise be hidden. The technique doubly-emphasises the structure of the central figures which are set off by the first background which is then in turn set off by the second, sharpening the viewer's focus on the action at the centre. The paint which forms the double background is applied uniformly and this evenness of application allows the delicate cross brush work which constructs the figures to stand out. There is also a sculptural element to Grimm 25: two blotches of thick paint adhere to the panel which disrupt the two-dimensional painted space with three dimensions of structure to be examined. There is also an unintentional living dynamic to Grimm

25. The inner window of the background was initially white but has darkened with age to become more cream-coloured, a change that Brown did not lament when he viewed the painting years after its completion. The change provides literal support for my claim above that paintings are not fixed things but subject to historical change like everything else.⁴ The change adds a layer of aesthetic dynamism: what a viewer decades hence might see is not what a contemporary viewer will see, not only because their interpretative frame will differ, but because the dynamic chemistry of the paint will change the physical appearance.



Grimm #25, (1999-2001), Oil and Verathane on Wood, 19.5x 19.75

Grimm 35 has an altogether different appearance from any of the examples of set one discussed thus far, but I have included it in the first set because it combines both organic form

⁴ I have personal insight into what Brown thought of Grimm 25 because it is part of my and Josie Watson's collection. We were able to discuss it with him on different occasions through the years.

and architectural structure and because it has a silliness to it perhaps unmatched in any of the other Grimms. A note of menace might have been struck by the black blob that appears to be in the process of enveloping a wall-like structure in front of it, but what is the wall like structure? It is painted with alternating flesh and white coloured vertical stripes of paint. The whole scene is clearly highlighted by the peaceful blue of the background and the solid stable green-brown of the ground on which the structure sits. There is a b-movie horror show feel to the black blob, more humorous than menacing: the best effort of the special effects director working with found materials before CGI allowed for the digital figuration of the wildest imaginings.⁵ In any case, there is nothing alive for the creature—if creature it be— to devour. Perhaps it is not ingesting the wall but only billowing up and over it, but whatever is going on, the oddness of the striped wall dominates the painting. There is almost no detailed structure to the paint, either in the background or the foregrounded figures: the stripes are thinly painted as if in single strokes and the blob is a pillowy mass of black paint rising up into the blue sky. There is nothing else like it in any of Brown's other paintings: a true anomaly within the Grimm anomaly.



Grimm # 35 (2004), Oil on Wood, 21×21

⁵ The connection to B-movie monsters is not gratuitous: Brown was an aficionado of B movies and could well have been playing with their conventions.

Grimm 47 also deploys a large black figure but in this case to construct an architectural structure and not an organic form. The upper half of the painting is dominated by this black figure, a large wedge or perhaps wall, viewed from above, which frames a complex of some sort. The sense one gets is of looking at two massive structures from a significant height. The complex is reminiscent of the penal structures in the paintings that I have discussed in “The Architecture of Dread.” The feel here is also one of confinement or imprisonment. A large turret building rises above the other two rectangular buildings. The entire complex appears as though it has been lifted from the ground as if floating despite what would be enormous mass. The bottom of the painting is blue and white, as if the sky and earth have been inverted. So while the carceral atmosphere created by the painting is at odds with the general playfulness of the Grimm series, the same mischievous confounding of initial impressions that I have been discussing appears here to. While Grimm 47 sounds notes of warning about the menace of the surveillance society menace returns, the whole complex seems to float in air like the “haystack” in Grimm 25 or the “pills” in Grimm 1, whose levitation above the earth connoted an impossible freedom of mass from the pull of gravity. In Grimm 47 the black wall enclosing the buildings suggests enclosure and confinement, but it rests on nothing and the land on which the complex sits appears to have been lifted from the earth. The more one looks the more disorienting the painting becomes: looking above at a complex floating in space enclosed by a wall anchored to nothing. This disorientation reminds us that painting is not just representation, it is representation of representation in which ordinary spatial orientations and photographic reproduction can be upset, upended, taken apart, recomposed, played with, or abstracted from altogether. The space of the painting is not the Euclidean space defined by the surface on which paint is applied but the imaginary space created by the application of paint to it.

The final painting that I will discuss in this section is also architectural, but stylistically it is connected to the severe scraping technique definitive of his post-Human Head series works. The background is largely a white void formed by scraping the paint away right down to the gesso, leaving only a few streaks of colour. Against this background Brown sets a green structure whose shape resembles the headframes of the mines that dominate the skyline of the Sudbury region. The headframe of the Garson mine loomed over the landscape only a few hundred meters from brown's childhood home. He would have seen it everyday from his backyard or walking to school.



Garson Mine (Brown's boyhood home would have been just out of frame, to the right).

I do not think that Grimm 57 is composed from memories of the headframe, but the resemblance is so close that it is hard to resist reading it as an echo or ghostly reflection of deep memories whose operation and influence Brown may have been ignorant but whose effects manifest themselves in the figure. That reading is complicated by the green colour of the structure, a reminder that we are not looking at a photograph. Yet, the structure seems so familiar to those who know the Sudbury area that thinking it as at least inspired by memories of headframes is

hard to resist. Maybe we are looking at a dreamscape, the white background a portal into memory. But the white portal into memory is in turn framed by a flat black border that extends from the bottom left hand corner over the top of the painting before gradually fading out as it descends the right hand side. The light that illuminates the dreamscape or the memoryscape is bordered by darkness: of night, of the past in which the dreamer did not exist and the future in which they will exist no more.



Grimm # 57 (2008) ,Oil on Wood, 16×12

Thought together, the paintings in the first subset of Grimm's allow the viewer to pose the question of the connection between geological, architectural, and organic forms. Brown assumes imaginary positions above his landscapes, creatures, and topologies, to examine the materiality of these forms for its own sake. While the geometrical angularity of the built environment contrasts with the eroded complexity of geological features and both with the

supple roundness of organic forms, these Grimms revel in the study of the aesthetics of material form as such. Raw physical forces have sculpted the landscape, iterative processes (descent plus modification, as Darwin described evolution) produced organic, conscious, and self-creative beings, and these conscious, self-creative beings build structures to suit their purposes and satisfy their social needs. Brown's representations of these forms are not comments on their social meaning but playful examinations and explorations of the aesthetics of structure and substance. Beyond all questions of function and use, Brown's paintings draw our attention to (and delight us with) the materiality of shape and surface.

II: Body Parts

The figures in the second subset of Grimm paintings are also play with the aesthetics of material form but focus on the body and its parts. The paintings grouped together here resemble organs and limbs (not always human) but abstracted from their organic connections to the body. On one level they could be read as specimens removed from the body for more careful study (and in that sense reminiscent of the Autopsy series). On an art-historical level they remind one of Gericault's studies for *The Raft of Medusa*.



Theodore Gericault: Studies for "Raft of the Medusa"

Brown knew and admired these studies of limbs impossibly entangled with other limbs and torsos severed from their appendages. The thematic and the art historical readings suggest that there is something sinister and macabre about this subset of paintings, but there is a third avenue of approach to this subset that is lighter and more humorous. Visitors to Brown's Richmond Street studio would have noticed several large specimen jars in which he "grew" toy organs. The organs were a children's amusement: dehydrated plastic pills that expanded when they were submerged in water. Brown sealed them in large mason jars and let them grow to fill the entire volume. Whether these specimen jar organs exerted any direct influence on this subset of Grimm's is uncertain. What is more important is that they are a reminder that one should not rush too quickly to conclude that the abstraction of organs and limbs from the bodily whole means Brown is obsessed with the body as a mere object for dissection and diagnosis of pathology. He was also as always like a curious child testing boundaries and playing with and transgressing the established rules. The artist's gaze is not the physicians or the coroner's: they play with the objects that the scientist studies.

The first example of the body-part themed Grimm's is # 13. The figure is clearly a foot separated from the rest of the leg just above the ankle and painted with the cross-hatched brushwork Brown often employed in the Grimm series as a whole. The brush work adds texture and complexity to the surface of the figure but there is no anatomical detail in the foot itself. The point where it has been severed is painted black while the foot itself is flesh-coloured, suggesting that Brown wanted the viewer to associate the figure with a foot. Then again, there are no toes, no defined ankle, lending a slight air of ambiguity to what on first glance seems unambiguously a human foot. The double-background technique is once again employed to concentrate attention on the figure: it is set off by a white rectangle of paint which is in turn

framed from above by darker blue. The figure blends into the white where the instep would be but otherwise appears in sharp relief from the smoothly applied white and blue paint. The cool white and blue background stands in contrast to the apparent violence the foot has suffered, as if to remind us that accidents often happen “out of the clear blue sky.” But looking at the painting one sees past the trace of violence to which the figure may have been subjected to appreciate the painterly contrast between simple smooth background and the complexity of the figure’s painted surface.



Grimm 13 (1997) Oil on Wood, 24.25x28.25

While Grimm 13 does not insist that viewers read it as the history of some violent trauma, there is nothing overly comical about it. The tension between the grotesque and the

humorous is posed more clearly by Grimm 26. The reader is immediately confronted by a built-up blob of paint that looks like a cancerous tumour. There is nothing visually pleasing about the figure formed from thick, caked-on paint. The disgust the figure arouses is emphasised by the surprising choice of purple as the colour field on which the paint has been built up. (This is not the only Grimm in which purples figures prominently). But the painting holds one's gaze long enough for the figure to take on new forms. On first glance, the central structure looks cancerous, but then the viewer notices two thin leg and foot like appendages extending almost to the bottom of the panel. They resemble bird feet, and once one notices them it changes the appearance of the figure. Is it a random accretion of tissue (a tumour) or is it some sort of bird-like creature? Brown is not playing tricks or painting illusions: the image does not appear differently when viewed from different perspective or angles but rather more ways of reading it are revealed the longer one looks at it. The painting first disgusts, then confuses, then amuses, but above all it impresses upon the viewer the need to tarry with Brown's paintings because the complexity of the paint.⁶

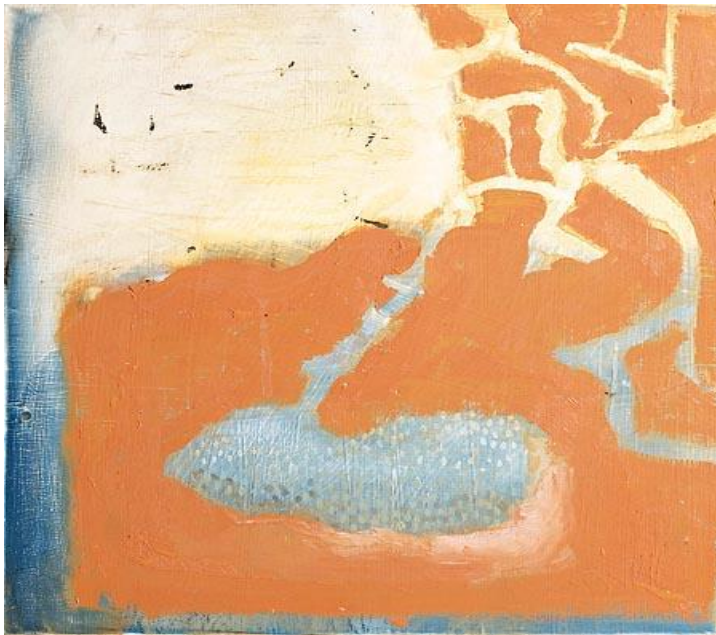
⁶ The same bird-like feet exercise a similar disruptive comic effect in Grimm 27. [Complete Catalogue of Brown's Works \(1980-2020\): Paintings – John Brown Archive](#)



Grimm #26, (1999-2001), Oil, Glue, Dry Pigment, Verathane on Wood, 19.5×19.75

Grimm's 29 and 30 are remarkable for different reasons. Grimm 29 is the painting that made me think of the plastic organs that Brown "grew" for his amusement. Tubes like the upper part of the digestive track stretch out and down, at the bottom of which is a blue stomach-like figure spotted with white and blue dots and painted against an orange-flesh coloured background. The orange-flesh background is framed by a strip of thinly applied blue that frames the bottom and extends up the left side until it bleeds into a lighter, almost white structure that extends along the top half of the panel. Like Grimm 35 (see above) the painted surface is mostly smooth and less worked up and over than is typical for Brown. But that smoothness does not mean that there is not a lot of visual work going on in the painting. The viewers eyes are initially drawn to the figure that appears to be a stomach. But then the painting complicates that reading. The stomach shaped figure is connected to a network of tubes at the top right of the painting that in turn

emanate from a void that dominates the upper left side. The void and the network emerging out of it look as much geological as organic: could we be looking at a subterranean passage way or cave system? Once again, one must avoid overly literal attempts to decode the painting. One does not understand this or any painting once one has figured out what it is “about.” Paintings are their own world; they are not about anything external. At the same time, their forms lead the viewer’s mind in certain directions. The playfulness of the Grimm’s lies in their constantly raising one expectation and then challenging it the longer the eye tarries. The stomach-like figure is near the centre of the painting, but the painting as a whole decentres itself as soon as the viewer traces the central figure along the network of tubes to their origin in the upper right. Initially we are apt to look to the stomach and then to the tubes extending down from the top. But once we get to the bottom we notice that we can trace the blue line at the bottom up to the top and see that there is no real break between the lighter-coloured shape and the tubes which develop from it and lead down to the stomach.



Grimm # 29 (2001) Oil on Wood, 14x 18

The final painting in this subset that I want to discuss is one of the most clearly humorous in the entire series. Grimm 30 pictures the lower appendages of some sort of fantastical bird materializing in the sky. The body and head of the creature are neither depicted nor hidden behind anything: it appears out of thin air. The creature is clutching a white egg-like object in its talons. The white is disrupted by a red and flesh coloured triangle at the bottom. The clutching action could be aggressive—has the creature stolen the object from a nest? Or it could be protective-- is it transporting an egg to safety? Regardless, the overall effect is comical and reminiscent once again of the inexpensive special effects of old b-movie monsters. If one compares the size of the talon and egg-like object to what could be trees on the ground the creature would be of enormous size. While teasing and playful in tone, the painting itself is not sloppy or childish: a dirty white background highlights the emerging figure and the paintwork on the egg is finely applied in red, white, and flesh tones. The white background is broken only by thin lines of paint above and below with a few details that suggest trees and which lead the viewer to read the white background as a sky and the figure taking shape in the centre as some sort of aerial creature.



Grimm 30 (2001) Oil on Wood, 14x18

Together, the paintings in this subset remind the viewer of the vulnerabilities of material bodies: they can be carved up and dissected or ripped apart by violent trauma, misshapen by tumours, or subject to monstrous mutations. Brown once again flirts, as he often does, with the flesh as grotesque. But the weight of mortality that presses down upon the coroner or surgeon is checked by the cartoonish elements; the quiet seriousness of the specimen collection in a museum of pathology is broken by the laughter some of these imaginary forms elicit. This subset of paintings reminds us that art is play. It is serious play, but still play: the power of the artist over forms and mood, their capacity to invent the rules of composition and arrangement according to which objects of experience are re-presented. The experience of art as serious play is an act of life-enjoyment, one which might even provoke laughter (which, when one thinks of it, one almost never hears in galleries).

III: Abstractions

As I have noted in earlier essays in this collection, Brown always considered himself a figurative painter. He disliked the colour field abstractions of mid-twentieth century abstract expressionism and had little time for art for art's sake snobbishness.⁷ Nevertheless, I believe that there is at least an analogy between the mode of composition of abstract expressionist paintings and the "total paintings" of Brown's final period.⁸ Both break down the classical relationship between figure and ground to make the entire painted surface the object of the viewer's focus.

⁷ John Bentley Mays, "Answers: A Fiction," *Catalogue: John Brown Retrospective Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art*, (Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2008), 16.

⁸ See Jeff Noonan, "The Infinite Without and Within: John Brown's Final Period 1." [infinite-without-within.pdf](#)

Most of the Grimm's maintain a more classic relationship between figure and ground and the double-background, windowing effect employed in many of them draw our attention not only to the object but to the fact that we are looking at an object (as if through a window or as illuminated in a halo of light). However, there is a third subset of 20 Grimms that I have classified under the title of "Abstractions" because none are organized around any centrally situated figure. These Grimm's lack the sublime power over the large total paintings like those of the future date series or Towerversion: they cannot envelop the viewer's experiential field given their smaller size. On the other hand, their smaller scale concentrates attention on the materiality of the paint itself that Brown exploits. The paint itself becomes the figure of these figureless paintings.

The first example of this series that I will discuss is Grimm 11. Swirls or billows of lighter red paint transition abruptly to a darker dried blood red central rectangle of colour. But then Brown teases us: is that one of the pig-like figures that appears in Grimm 10?⁹ Perhaps, but it is marginal to the painting as a whole: the colour swirls and blocks dominate our field of vision. The painting does not look like a Rothko, but it invites comparison in so far as it draws the viewer in to a sort of meditative relationship with the surface that Rothko wanted to provoke. The top half and lower quarter of the painting are more heavily worked, more thickly colours jostle for dominance and offset the smoother brushwork that forms the darker red rectangle. Despite the association of red with violence and the resemblance of the colour of the central block to dried blood, the painting does not evoke the aftermath of crime or human-caused event:

⁹ A similar figure appears in a painting that Brown referred to (according to his former assistant Matthew Janisse) as "the pink painting." I am tempted to classify as a Grimm but since it is not labelled as such on the panel and I can find no evidence that Brown included it amongst the 97 Grimm's I have archived it with the other Grimm-like paintings. [Complete Catalogue of Brown's Works \(1980-2020\): Paintings – John Brown Archive](#)

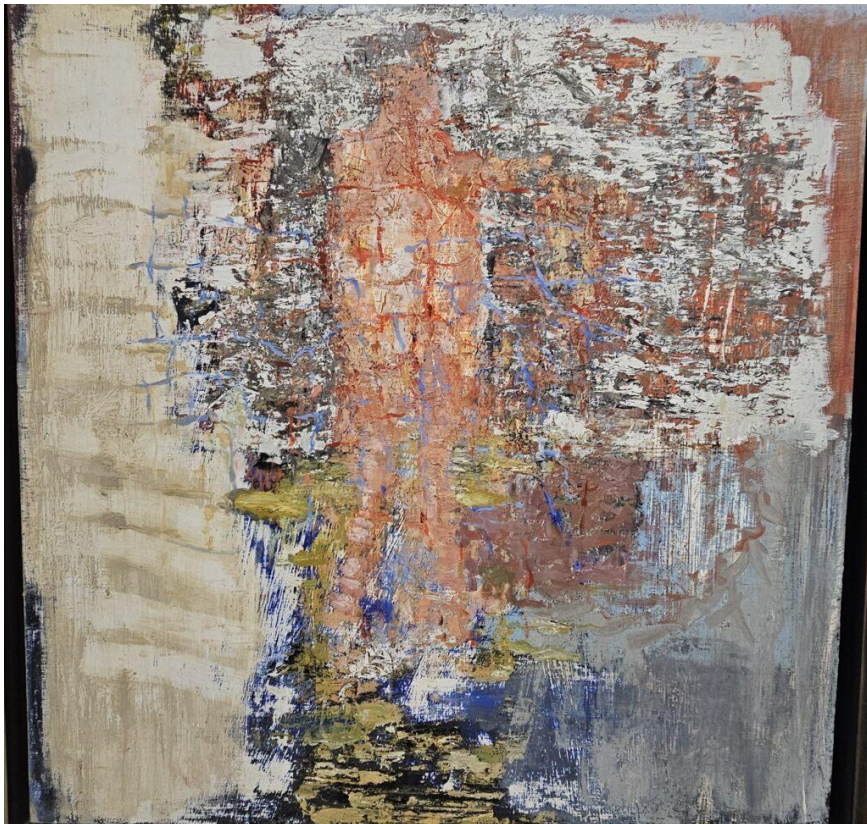
the viewer is not drawn into a scene at some determinate point in a narrative that began off the panel but confronted with a completed field of colour whose tonal shifts and contours compel our gaze and interest.



Grimm 11 (1997), Oil on Wood, 24.25x28.25

Grimm 19 is more ambiguous as an abstraction. A good case could be made to classify it under the first or second subsets in my suggested taxonomy. However, I have chosen to read it

as an abstraction because its compelling power is a function of the material qualities of the heavily applied paint that brown liberates from any obvious representational function. Brown forces us to view the painting as a *painting*. Exquisite brush work applied to the thickly applied oil produces a panel of almost infinite complexity: careful attention reveals detail after detail: scrapes, delicate additions of line, variation of shades of colour as well as contrasts between different colours, and accretion of paint somehow resolve themselves into a coherent order when one steps back and takes the painting in as a whole.



Grimm 19 (199-2000), Oil on Wood, 24x24

While a case could be made for Grimm 19 as figurative, not even Brown could deny that Grimm 48 is an abstraction. One of the simplest paintings in all of Brown's *oeuvre*, Grimm 48 is little more than a patch of sky blue. Indeed, if it were not hung in a gallery with other Brown's

one might not recognize it as his work. There is some brushwork within the blue field- smaller patches of white which accent the blue but do not suggest any sort of structure—and the stripes of paint that edge the panel give the painting the window-like or torn effect of so many Grimms. But here there is nothing framed and, in a sense, nothing to see in the centre of the painting. As one looks more carefully one discovers that the blue colour field is not a simple as it first looks, but judged in light of Brown's works as a whole Grimm 48 is notable for what is absent from it: heavily worked paint, a human, architectural, or landscape figure, a sense of dread or angst. Even moreso than Grimm 11, Grimm 48 invites a meditative relationship to it: the blue field draws the viewer in, calms, cools, and evokes a sense of stillness and peace.



Grimm 48, (2004), Oil on Wood, 21x21

The final paintings that I want to discuss under this subsection come in two series of three paintings each. They are so similar in appearance and small size (11.75 x 11.25) that they must have been conceived and executed together, although since Brown left little written explanations of any of his work I have no documentary evidence to support what the eyes tell the viewer. Grimm's 62-64 are chromatically simple, mostly black and white with red accents. White dominates the panel but unlike Grimm 48 here a central void is used as the occasion to construct complex painted forms that have structure but are more complex shapes than organic, architectural, or geological figures. The viewer is attracted by the complexity of the form that emerges from the scraping away of red and black paint. Of the three Grimm 64 is the least abstract: one could see analogies between its central form and some of the architectural figures I discussed in the first section. However, the similarities to 62 and 63 are undeniable when they are viewed simultaneously and the first two do not suggest anything figural. All three paintings work according to a dialectic of light and dark, density and emptiness, solidity and ephemerality, materiality and space. All three convey a sense of movement from the first pole to the second: dense matter gradually unravelling itself and evolving towards structure. In each the structure gradually distinguishes itself from solid chunks of black and before gradually fading away into the nothingness of the central white void. Although there appears to be movement and development of complexity out of uniformity there is nothing organic about the look of what emerges from the solid black grounds. The further the scraped paint "moves" away from its ground the more delicately textured it becomes: the effect is not unlike watching a wisp of smoke twist, curl back on itself, and unravel before dissolving in air, although here the structure begins more as a block than a tendril. One might also find these paintings meditative, although

in comparison to Grimm 11 and 48 the disintegrating complexity of the emergent form attracts closer scrutiny.



Grimm 62, 63, 64 (2008) Oil on Wood, 11.75x 11.25

Grimm's 78-80 are also a set of three very small (12x12 to 15x15) paintings with strong internal resemblances to each other, although in contrast to Grimms 62-64 they are much simpler in their composition and appearance. The two series are similar in that they are each sets of three in which the second painting in each series could be read as a transformation of the first and the third a transformation of the second, but the fact that 78-80 were painted 2 years after the former suggests that there was no connection between the series. On each painting a uniform field of dark paint is interrupted almost imperceptibly by flecks or drops or swirls of lighter tones. The paintings are pure painted form: there is no suggestion that the tension between dark and light is meant to evoke familiar real world contrasts between the two: stars in the night sky or distant city lights punctuating the night. Grimm 78 has an almost accidental appearance, as if a perfectly black panel had been stained by inadvertent drops of paint, but not as in a Pollock, deliberately drizzled, but simply dripped accidentally, as if from inattention. Since Brown always painted his panels fixed to the wall or propped up on milk crates and his well-deserved reputation for extreme meticulousness makes the likelihood of the drips actually being accidents low, the painting does have a certain sloppiness to it, but a deliberately executed sloppiness.

Grimm 79 is more worked than Grimm 78, but it too has that accidental look to it. Here blotches and flecks of paint extend through the midline of the painting: above is almost uniformly black, below there is more interruption of the blackness with smaller flecks of paint and a cloud of grey towards the left side. But like Grimm 78 Grimm 79 has been left looking relatively unworked and random. Grimm 80 is the simplest of the three: here there is almost no disruption of the dark by strokes and dots of lighter paint but swirling clouds of black and dark grey. The paint has almost no internal structure save for a pool of lighter grey paint that oozes out from the right side of the painting and very faint flecks of whiteish paint to the left. The lighter grey pool is bifurcated and the top and bottom almost mirror images of each other. But the oil-spill like pool and the flecks of light are powerless against the void: the slick curls back from the night rather than continuing its advance' the flecks of light are barely discernible against the void. Both emphasise more than disrupt the uniform field of absence that dominates the panel.



Grimm 78, 79, 80 (2010), Oil on Wood, 15x15, 12x12, 12x12

The noted abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell argued, following an idea from Alfred North Whitehead, that to abstract was to draw attention to a feature of reality by isolating

it from its usual context.¹⁰ An abstract idea isolates a property or dimension which is shared by concrete particulars which modify or qualify it and posits it as a criterion for membership in a set. There is no “squareness” observable in nature but only an endless variety of approximations. The mind abstracts what is common and purifies it in a definition (figure of four sides of equal length). The abstract expressionists did something analogous with painting: they abstracted formal relationships of shape and colour that were traditionally embodied as figures in order to draw attention to colour relationships, or geometrical patterns, or the mode of application of paint itself the subject matter. Brown’s paintings in this subset of Grimm’s abstract the process of applying paint from the representation of objects but not to concentrate attention on some formal relationship between colour or the purity of shapes. Instead they concentrate attention on the plasticity of painting (the panel is an open possibility on which a painted world can be created, but the artist is under no obligation to create a recognizable world). While these paintings resist the demand that art be “about” anything recognizable they also resist “art for art’s sake” indifference to the viewer’s response to the work. They are aesthetic in the sense of the term developed by Immanuel Kant. For Kant, the aesthetic contrasted with the conceptual. Whereas scientific knowledge was expressed in universal concepts and principles, human knowledge originates in the sensuous perception of concrete particulars.¹¹ Used in relation to artworks specifically, aesthetics relates to the artwork as a unique synthesis of content and form, as opposed to a sign that points beyond itself to the thing in the real world that explains it.

¹⁰ Robert Motherwell, “The Humanism of Abstraction: The Painter Speaks” *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, Dore Ashton and Joan Banach, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 250.

¹¹ See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith, ed., London: MacMillan, 1987, 63-67. For the extension of the term to the experience of artworks in particular see Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, James Creed Meredith., ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, 41-90.

These Grimm's affirm an analogous view of the creation for art for the sake of human sensuous enjoyment, rather than moral instruction or virtuoso displays of talent. The source of enjoyment which increases when the viewer is the formal organization of the material, textural properties of the paint itself. These two series challenge the viewer to suspend the human brain's propensity to project meaning onto observed patterns and just look and revel in what is seen (as opposed to thinking about what that which is seen might mean). This subset of Grimms abstract the process of applying paint to panel from the goal of representing *anything* to encourage the viewer to let their eyes do the work and enjoy the painting for what it ultimately is: an internally organized material singularity, a world which exists only within the frame that encloses it.

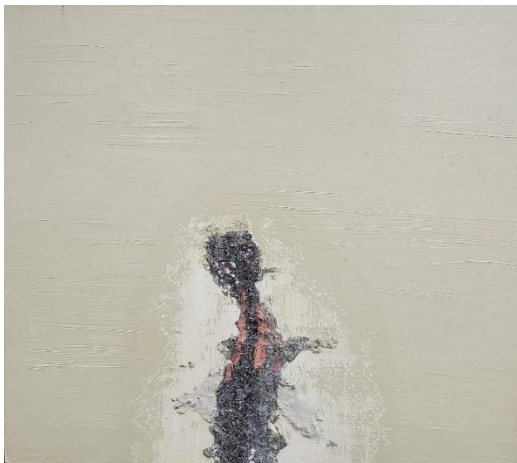
IV: Portraits

The paintings included in the preceding subset are as abstract and non-figurative as Brown's work gets. They show him to have a larger painterly vocabulary than even he was apt to admit, and they stress again that the pleasing plastic qualities of paint and not existential brooding on mortality and the vulnerabilities of flesh is the deepest unifying theme of his mature work. The paintings in the final subset of Grimm's stand in a relationship of polar opposition to the abstractions. This subset contains some of the most literal paintings of Brown's career. These Grimm's stand in the sharpest of contrast to the heavily worked over large paintings of the post-2000 period. However, one should not conclude that Brown suddenly embraced the conventions of formal portraiture, even in the Grimm's that most resemble a traditional presentation of their subject. Once again, we will find that I have included paintings that challenge my classification of them as portraits but which I read as pushing the boundaries of portraiture rather than crossing the line into pure exploration of figurative form. The boundary testing examples thought together with the more traditional portraits support my thesis that the

Grimm series is distinguished by the predominance of playful ambiguity. While many of the portrait Grimms complicate identification of the figure as a person sitting for a portrait, even the most simply painted are based around a tension between respect and cartoon-caricature that unsettles the traditional function of portraiture: to confirm the elevated social status, power, and dignity of the subject. While the *Human Head Series* also unsettled this conventional function by scraping and smearing away individuating facial features the Grimm portraits are more tender, less consciously about deflating the pretensions of rich men, even when they impose wildly unnatural appearances on what one assumes is a head. But the tenderness is also mixed with that most human of dispositions towards ourselves: humour. Like the Polaroid pictures I discussed in the introduction the sense one gets looking at these Grimms is that we should not take ourselves too seriously. At the end of the day a formal portrait is not really different than a silly pose captured by a Polaroid: only the pretensions of the sitter make it different. But once those pretensions are seen through, a portrait is just as silly and ephemeral as the clowning postures people assume when they are feeling unselfconscious and silly. The formal portrait in oil will outlast the subject by hundreds of years, but it does not confer immortality. Like a snapshot it captures a fleeting moment in time. Once the ephemerality of life has been recognized there is nothing left to do but laugh— at one's self, most of all.

The first painting that I want to discuss under this heading tests my classificatory scheme, for it is arguably not a portrait or even a human being. Grimm 17 constructs a shadow figure, vaguely human, from glued together paint flecks that accumulated as the result of brown's scraping techniques on the studio floor. The method of composition is the same as in the *Yard* series, and it is by appeal to the *Yard* series that I justify my classifying Grimm 17 amongst the portraits. The individual works in the *Yard Series* were all named after Brown's family members

and friends: they were obviously not portraits in any conventional sense, but they did evoke something about the importance of paying homage to defining relationships with loved ones. Viewed in that light the figure in Grimm 17 appears as a ghostly silhouette of a human being floating in a grey-green background. The figure is accented by another instance of the white halo effect: a sign that Brown wants our attention squarely focussed on it. The figure lacks identity, it lacks morphological detail, but still one feels as though one is standing in front of a human presence. But perhaps presence is all that ultimately matters: the figure says nothing about who or what it is and was but simply inscribes its presence in the order of things: it is matter that occupies space and if for no other reason than that alone it mattered.



Grimm 17 (1999-2000), Oil on Wood, 24x24

Grimm 22 could also be read as referencing earlier Brown works, in this case the Ping series. Like the Ping's the figure is formed by an over-sized head-like form but without any recognizable facial features.



Ping B (1997) Mixed Media on Paper, 35.5x27

There are hints of arms at its side, but the body has no physiological details. Indeed, it would not be difficult to dispute my classifying it amongst the portrait Grimm's because it is far from clear that the figure constructed with cross-hatch brushwork is human at all. It also resembles the pill-shaped figures from Grimm one and the "haystacks" from Grimm 25. At first glance this figure seems to be floating too, but a closer look suggests that it is anchored to the ground, but not with two feet but something more like a stem. It is leaning forward, slightly off-balance, or perhaps leaning forward to get a look at something on the ground, but there are no eyes and there is nothing obvious on the ground to look at. If portraits must be centred on a human person then Grimm 22 is not a portrait. But if Brown's purpose is to question classical canons of how portraits are to be constructed and playfully tease the viewer about what is and is not a representation of a human figure, then my classifying Grimm 22 as a portrait Grimm is defensible. As with other Grimm's that I have discussed the longer one looks at the painting the

more initial impressions change: despite the lack of all identifying detail the form resolves itself more and more as a human being trying to steady or balance itself; the head has no facial features but something about its shape encourages the viewer to project human expressions on to it. The Ping's figures were highly-distorted but very clearly human figures, and perhaps it is familiarity with those earlier paintings that encourages my response to Grimm 22.¹²



Grimm 22, (199-2001) Oil on Wood, 25.5x25.5

My reading of Grimm 23 is similarly influenced by my knowledge of Brown's influences, but also by the very clear allusion to Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly paintings. The telltale sign is the black block painted over the figure's head. In the Ned Kelly paintings, the black block represents the famous Australian outlaw's armour. Brown quotes the black block as a signifier of anonymity and disguised identity, more terrifying in its solidity, weight, and opacity than any mask, but also slightly comical in its severity. But then one keeps looking and one is

¹² Brown took the name of the series from a short story by Sameul Beckett about a body immobilized in a confined space.

led to question these first impressions. Ambiguity abounds, as it does in so many of the Grimm's. Brown could be playing with the conventions of portraiture again: a portrait of a person wearing an iron helmet to mask their identity seems oxymoronic, given that the purpose of the portrait is to confirm the high social standing of the sitter. Unless, of course, one's identity (like Ned Kelly's) is synonymous with wearing an armoured disguise. But then as one continues to look one is led to question further whether Grimm 23 is really quoting the Nolan paintings: is it a helmeted head, or is it some sort of geological formation, a black mesa or butte. And what are the red structures rising from the flat top of the central figure? One barely notices them at first, so finely sketched on top of the dense black of the figure. They look like constructed towers, in which case the paintings plays with the relationship between the human and the geological: the viewer first associates the black figure with a helmeted human figure, but then, once the red structures come into focus one is tempted to reverse that reading and see these structures as signs of absent human beings who built them on top of a now non-human looking rock formation. Whatever Brown's intentions were, the ambiguity is real, but if the ambiguity is real, then my classification of Grimm 23 amongst the portrait Grimm's is defensible, but hardly certain.



Grimm 23 (1999-2001) Oil on Wood, 25.5x25.5

The playful ambiguities of these first three examples will have perhaps tested the reader's patience with my claiming that there are any "portraits" in the Grimm series at all. I will try the reader's patience further before arriving at a discussion of the Grimm's that clearly are rooted in the traditions of portraiture. Grimm 32 is another ambiguous figure: is it a bird-like creature (such were suggested by the "feet" in Grimm 26 or the talons in Grimm 30?) Here the feet are hidden but on first glance the protuberance where the nose would be on a human face in profile resembles a rounded beak and the brush work on the face perhaps suggestive of feathers. But the arms dangling from the figure's side seem more human, and Brown has taken care to add three fingers extended and drooping down from the wrist. Once the arms become the centre of attention the appearance changes and one sees a person, perhaps a woman, wearing some sort of long red garment walking with determined stride on hidden legs through a field towards a

destination that we cannot see. The comic play between these readings is the thing: there is something undisputably silly about the creature that must have been intended, making Grimm 32 one of the best examples of the “anomalous,” cartoonish, light-heartedness of the Grimm series.



Grimm 32 (2001-2002), Oil on Wood, 14x18

I arrive finally at two sets of Grimms that are clearly portraits but which vary between simple, tender treatments, comic caricature, and heavily worked severe stressing of their subjects. These come in two sets: 36-42 and 45-46. I will discuss 36, 39, 41, 42, 45 and 46. Each of these paintings was completed in 2004, all are 21x21, and therefore painted on a single batch of prepared panels. Brown must have been working on them simultaneously (he always worked on several paintings at once), but their stylistic differences suggest that he did not conceive of them as forming a unified set, but each represents different experiments in playing with portraiture. In Grimm 36 a bodyless bust stares out at the viewer from a uniformly painted reddish orange background. The face is white, death-mask like, except the eyes are clearly open,

staring ahead, and the lips pursed but with maybe the slightest hint of a smile, but the overall tone is one of composure, as one would expect of a subject sitting for a formal portrait. But Brown has abstracted the face from the body, the face floats unnaturally in painterly space; a small neck more like a metal rod that could be inserted into an artificial body than a human neck extends a few centimeters below the face. But despite the lack of flesh tone in the face it strikes the viewer as both very much alive and dignified, as in classical portraits, which Brown nevertheless contests with his choice of colours and his imposed disconnection between head, body, and material surroundings.



Grimm 36 (2004) Oil on Wood, 21x21

Grimm 39 likewise abstracts the face from body and material surroundings, but the paint has been applied in an almost Van Gogh like series of short sharp brush marks from which the appearance of the face emerges. As in Grimm 36, the eyes are fixed, but here they appear to

stare with the stoic, wide-open existential dread of the subjects of Giacometti's drawings (also favourites of Brown).



Grimm 39, (2004) Oil on Wood, 21x21.

The head is squared off and not rounded, as human heads are, and the flesh represented by exquisitely complex brushwork that just barely brings out the face from the background. The background itself deploys the double-framing technique I have discussed before, but here instead of white a darker grey surrounded by mustard colour edging does the work of drawing our eyes towards the face. The face emerges from the dark grey through quick jabs of paint, almost van Gogh like, with a very few flecks of white sufficient to establish the contrast necessary for the viewer to resolve the face in detail. Across the top of its head, Brown has added a red-orange wedge, like the sculpted edges of a crew cut, that serves to emphasise the angularity of the composition. Instead of a short stub for a neck as in Grimm 36 Brown has added a more complete neck and shoulders, but these are stripped of flesh and constructed from single strokes

of red paint: a skeletal structure in the barest outline revealed by stripping away the tissue. The x-ray like rendering of the bodily frame is jarring beneath the heavily worked up paint of the face, a mode of presentation that confronts us with the emotional expressiveness of the face and the mute materiality of the bodily superstructure that supports it. Looking at them today, when the news is dominated by drone warfare and apocalyptic fears of AI it is easy to see these two paintings posing the question of whether we have reached the point where a human faces could be stretched over a non-human skeletal frame.

No sooner are we led to pose deep problems of human identity in the age of intelligent machines than Brown changes the tone of the conversation entirely. Grimm 41 is the most anomalous in the entire Grimm anomaly. It is as simple in composition as the abstract Grimm 48, as silly as the “chicken-lady” of Grimm 32, a caricature of a man in profile, head elongated and oversized (as in the Ping like Grimm 22) a cartoon in pink surrounded by yellow surrounded in turn by a greenish beige background. The shocking pink of the face tests the viewer’s ability to take the painting seriously, but perhaps that is the point, a respite from the heaviness of Brown’s usual treatment of the human face and figure, a playful pushing of the limits of the viewer to go along with the artist. The face is smoothly painted except for a bulbous nose, exaggerated in size as in tourist-trap caricatures, painted in red and yellow and sharply differentiated from the pink face as if it is removable (like a clown nose). Like Grimm 48, if it were a stand-alone painting one might have trouble identifying it as a Brown, but it does not look out of place in the Grimm series as a whole, even though it is on the outer limits of silliness.



Grimm 41, (2004) Oil on Wood, 21x21.

In many ways even simpler, and for many reasons more intriguing, is Grimm 42. Simpler, because although the facial features are drawn in a detail almost universally absent from all of Brown's post 2000 work, unmarred by any scraping, smudging, or layering of paint, the appropriately scaled construction is accomplished by only a few single brushstrokes in red. The rest of the painting is bright yellow background. The face is late middle aged, pudgy, dignified, but whose dignity is immediately disrupted by three lines of paint extending up from, or behind, his head. They do not seem to be attached in any organic way to the head, like a tuft of hair, nor are they attached to anything else- another comic element imposed on an otherwise (save for the jarring yellow background and red outlines of the facial features) a very traditional portrait.



Grimm 45, (2004) Oil on Wood, 21x21.

Of whom? Here is where the painting becomes intriguing. The painting looks like it could have been developed from one (or perhaps an amalgam) of the pencil and paint sketches discovered in Brown's studio after his death.



Untitled, circa 2002, Tempera on Paper, 12,75x9.5

These were drawn between 2000 and 2007, were never publicly shown. but the sheer number of them as well as the delicacy of the drawings suggests that they were important to Brown and could perhaps have been the first stage of a series of paintings that never developed. None were titled, but one was framed, which is possible evidence that Brown was mulling over the idea of showing them. Perhaps Grimm 42 was a test bed for a future series? There is no evidence to suggest that it was, but that Brown returned to drawing at this scale and this systematically after he had ceased to work out his paintings in studies before their composition in the 1990s and that the figure in Grimm 42 evokes the men sketched in the drawings suggest, but do not prove, that there may have been a connection and that Brown had plans to work up more of those drawings into paintings.

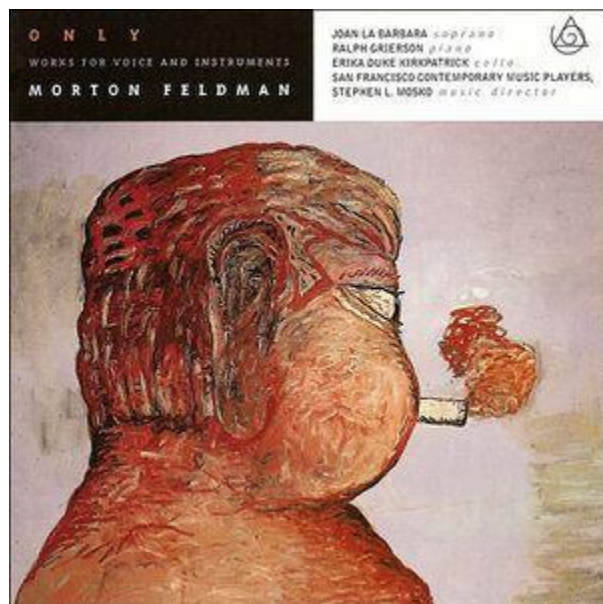
My comments now move from one of the simplest and mysterious Grimms to one of the most complex, also mysterious, but ferocious of the series. Grimm 45 again flirts with the monstrous. The square, head-like but not human figure fills almost the entire panel. The rapid brush strokes Brown deployed evoke feathers or fur: the viewer is almost tempted to reach out and touch the painting. There are no eyes, ears, or nose, but a little above mid-figure there is a aperture: a mouth, a wound? What appear to be square teeth are reminiscent of the mouths of early Bacon's that influenced Brown at the beginning of his career. However, Grimm 45 was painted at the same time as Grimm 44 (named "Wound" on the back of the painting). Whereas the figure dominates the panel in Grimm 45 Grimm is all background save for an ulcerous hole that appears in the upper left corner. While Grimm 44 continues Brown's career long fascination with diseased flesh, Grimm 45, while inhuman, is also comic.



Grimm 45, (2004), Oil on Wood, 21x21.

Its feathery appearance and size relative to the background evoke Guston, and in particular his portrait of the composer Morton Feldman, which Brown would have known because he was an admirer of Guston's figurative works and because the painting formed the cover of a CD of Feldman's work that was part of Brown's extensive music collection.¹³

¹³ Sholem Krishtalka notes the (in his view, too) strong influence that Guston exercised on Brown. See Sholem Krishtalka, "Review of 'That Visceral Thing' (John Brown at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, *White Hot Magazine*, June, 2008. [April 2008, John Brown @ Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art](#)



There is no evidence to support the claim that Grimm 45 is an homage to Guston, but the visual analogy between the techniques seems clear.

The final Grimm portrait that I will comment upon is Grimm 46. It returns the viewer, visually, tonally, and emotionally, to Grimm 36 (see above), but it is even simpler and more ghostly. Like Grimm 36 the bodyless, floating head is painted in white, but more evenly than Grimm 36, and against a quiescent almost turquoise background. The colour of the background evokes still waters, and the abstraction of the head from the body suggests a pure, weightless existence unencumbered by labour, by stress, by travails of any sort. Is the figure smiling at his freedom from material connection to the earth? Perhaps. The lips are together, but there seems to be the faintest trace of a smile, which adds to the feeling of peaceful serenity the painting evokes. It stands in jarring contrast to the monstrous figure of Grimm 44 and the dripping wound of Grimm 44, even though it was completed in the same year, on the same size panel (and therefore from the same lot of prepared panels). Yet, content and even happy as the face may be, its eyes are empty: they seem open and staring ahead, but they are represented as darker

patches without iris or pupil. Look too long at the eyes and the feel of the painting shifts: are we looking at a stylised face content with its lots in life (the subject of traditional portraiture) or a ghost of that man, or a death mask? Like almost all of the Grimm's the spirit of ambiguity triumphs over the viewer's desire to work out a consistent and complete reading of the painting. The serenity of the painting draws us in but as we tarry more unsettling evocations arise.



Grimm 46 (2004) Oil on Wood, 21x21

Conclusion

Brown produced Grimm's continuously from 1997 through to his death in 2020, but most were produced in 6 bursts of painting: 16 in 1997, 8 between 1999-2001, 16 again in 2004, 8 in

2008, 7 in 2009, and 11 in 2010.¹⁴ For Brown to complete 16 paintings in a year is extraordinary, given his known penchant for working, re-working, and continuing to work on paintings until they had to go to the gallery to be hung. There must have been some unique motivation behind the Grimm's that explained their smaller scale, the playfulness of many of them, and the broader range of techniques they deploy. Here again, Brown's aversion to writing about his motivations and practices hampers the interpreter's ability to explain definitively the origins and distinctiveness of the Grimm series.

Comparing the Grimm's to the larger paintings and series he produced during this period, the different tones and techniques that characterise the Grimm's stand out. The Grimm's are not *sui generis* creations without any analogues in the larger paintings and series that he painted during this time. Figures that remind one of the glued together paint flecks from 1999's *Yard Series* appear in the Grimms and the playfulness that pervades the Grimm's also appears in the gouache *Partial Self-Portraits Series* of 2002-3. The *Future Date Series* paintings of 2005-6 are hopeful in the sense that Brown anticipates there being a world in which people still look at art centuries from now, but the Grimm's are not so much invested in the future as they are delight in the immediate moment (again, like snapshots we take of happy times). The brushwork on some Grimm's constructs richly textured figures but none approach the fractal complexity of the *Thing, Nothing Series* (2003). The *Eight Portraits of Thoroughly Researched People* (2015) have the unfinished look of some Grimms but their subjects are portrayed as specimens for medical examination rather than subjects sitting voluntarily for a portrait.¹⁵ The mood of some of the more architectural Grimm's overlaps with the structures in the *Red, Black Series* (2008)

¹⁴ Counting only the numbered Grimms

¹⁵ The figures in the paintings were inspired by diagnostic photographs in old medical books.

and *Drone Series* (2014) but there is nothing in the larger paintings or series that remotely resembles the silliness of Grimm 41, the emptiness of Grimm 48, or the meditative quiet of Grimms 78-80.

The ambiguity that pervades the Grimm paintings toys with my audacity to try to sort them into subsets. I have argued that there is a playfulness to the Grimms not found, typically, in the larger works from this period, but it does not take long to find menacing structures or monstrous creatures in them. Many of the Grimms are less worked up and over than the best of the larger paintings finished between 1997 and 2019, but one can also find washed out and faded out backgrounds in some of those larger paintings. Still, looking at the series as a whole, and comparing it to the larger paintings one does sense something different, a childlike mischievous intelligence pervading and unifying the Grimm's that is mostly absent from the larger works. I say childlike intelligence and not naivete: they self-consciously play with conventions; like snapshots of good times they do not negate the darker dramas of the human family history, but they do lighten the mood of life without denying its seriousness.¹⁶

“Paintings don’t bite, at least they don’t nip you in the calf as dogs do, but they do do something, they can turn your head.” Georg Baselitz

¹⁶ Grimm 97 2015 is the last numbered Grimm. However, Brown also referred to a small painting given as gift to the artist Margaux Smith in 2018 as a Grimm. Since it was not numbered I have not included it in the series,

