

Heads, No Faces: Brown's Human Heads Series (1985-2003)

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The first exhibition of Brown's *Human Heads* (1985-2003) was both a return and a turning point. A return: after the 1985 Lamanna show Brown's attempt to free himself from the neo-expressionist label had seemingly failed. That show was poorly received, with early critical champion John Bentley Mays remarking, in retrospect, that, aside from the powerfully painted *Fully Scaled-Portrait*, the rest of the show was littered with "self-conscious, feeble images pastiched from *Time* magazine covers and other media sources."¹ Mays speculated that Brown was trying "to shake old-fashioned painterly expressiveness from his art and re-do his work to fit the sharper, cooler, more primly academic and politically correct mood emerging (or re-emerging) on Queen Street, and everywhere else in the art world, at mid-decade."² But Brown was not an academic and certainly not politically correct (or even particularly political). The lack of conviction showed in the 1985 work. Mays continued: "By 1985, Brown had largely given up the loathing of flesh and the relentless dwelling on the bleakness which he'd copied over from his mentor, the influential English oddity Francis Bacon, but he remained as vulnerable as the next artist to profound doubt."³ But the capacity to doubt and the willingness to accept failure are the conditions of growth and development. Brown withdrew from the scene for three years.

¹ John Bentley Mays, "Tortured Portraits Proof Brown is Back on Track," *Globe and Mail*, Oct. 1, 1988, C4.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*



Fully Scaled Portrait (1985)

A turning point: The Human Heads restore the atmosphere of existential brooding over the finitude of the flesh to his work. However, from a compositional standpoint, they are the first fully-realized examples of the building up-scraping down practice for which Brown would become known. Like classical sculpture and portraiture Brown, zeroed in on the head as the bearer of human identity. However, the images were produced by distorting the facial features that we typically use to identify a mere human head as an individual person. Instead of cleanly rendered portraits, the viewer is confronted with heads which are almost monstrous: looming presences of smeared out and scraped off paint. Yet, they are not, in the end, monstrous, but recognizably human, both heavy and delicate. For viewers, they pose both an interrelated aesthetic-philosophical problem. By working out a new means of rendering portraits of human

heads, the paintings challenge us to ask: in what does the humanity of the head consist?



Human Head # 1 (1985-1987)

The years between the 1985 and 1988 show marked the end of Brown's art-historical apprenticeship. That does not mean that his influences disappeared: there is still something Baconian about the heads, but when Brown felt ready to re-emerge he had made those influences his own, painting in a language of scraped down brush work that has no real analogue in the

history of contemporary painting. The paintings in the 1985 show were more traditionally planned and painted, undistorted, partially naked bodies. They glowed with the same inner light one finds in some Bacon's works, but there was little hint as to the direction Brown would travel. Gone also are any references to land or landscape; indeed, all social and historical context has been stripped away, along with most facial features. The viewer is confronted with a disembodied head without location in time or place. They loom; their presence captivates attention and forces self-reflection: what am I looking at, and what am I that is doing the looking? The importance and lasting value of these arresting images lies in their power to simultaneously draw the viewer into the image and away from it, into their own self-consciousness, a power which is an effect of, I will argue, their material composition.

I will unpack this argument in three sections. In the first, I maintain that the existential problems posed by the heads is a function of their material composition. They are not illustrations of ideas, they are paintings that organically express the problem of human identity through their materiality as paintings. The scraping away of highly resolved features is the painterly means by which the idea is articulated, a practice which is in turn related to the material on which the paint is applied. Wood provides the solidity necessary for the (literal) hard work to which the paint is subjected. In the second section, I argue that their power as paintings is a function of the abstraction of the heads from all social and historical referents. While very much figurative paintings, the figures themselves float in space and confront us as solitary presences. I suggest that Brown's move away from strict rendering and illustration of the face deepens the viewer's capacity for identification with the heads. The depth of this identification is the key to their lasting success as art works. In conclusion, I explore the deeper philosophical implications of the way in which Brown portrays his Human Heads. The answer to the question that they

pose: in what does the humanity of the heads (our humanity) consist? is: our capacity to endure and bear witness through time.

1: Scratching the Surface

In a 2008 interview with the *Global and Mail's* Gary Michael Dault, Brown explained the evolution of his thinking about his practice. Initially, he told Dault, he thought of scraping the surface of his paintings as a function of anxiety over authorship.⁴ Analogous to Brecht's "alienation effects," the scraping away of paint directed the viewer to the *work*, not the artist-*worker*.⁵ However, since the scraping off is still an intentional act that produces a finished work which is hung under a proper name in a gallery, the attempt to erase authorship is self-undermining: the more one tries to make anonymous by a recognizable technique, the more one becomes associated with the technique. Brecht's theatrical works stand out because of their alienation effects, Brown's paintings for the worked, eroded, distressed surfaces. Realizing that he could only ever achieve a pyrrhic victory over authorship, Brown eventually came to see his scraping technique "as a form of drawing."⁶

⁴ Gary Michael Dault, "Erasing, for Me, is Really a Form of Drawing," *Global and Mail*, Saturday, February 23rd, 2008, R15.

⁵ As Brecht said of his use of alienation effects, "it is just a -widely practiced way of drawing one's own or someone else's attention to a thing." Bertolt Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting," *Brecht on Theatre*, John Willett, ed., (London: Eyre Methuen), 1974, 143.

⁶ Dault, "Erasing, for Me, Is Really a Form of Drawing, R15.



Human Head #10 (1988) (as numbered for the 1988 show)

In his earlier years, Brown worked in a more traditional way, producing grease pencil and graphite studies as a preparation for the full-scale paintings. The composition would be formally worked out in the sketch and the painting positively resolved by a straightforward scaling up of

the image. Traditional drawing subtended the painting as the prior working out of the central image. As his practice developed, this traditional relationship between drawing and the final painting gave way to a process of working out the image through the application and subtraction of paint. The process was not spontaneous, in the sense of action painting, but rather open-ended. Without a formal study to guide the application of paint, the process was freed from subservience to a prior idea and literally worked out through the application and scraping off of the paint. The traditional function of drawing-- roughing out the idea-- was absorbed into, made an organic element of, the work of painting itself.

The paintings became individuated in the way in which a human life becomes individuated: through a process of following out the implications of decisions taken in the moment. One might have a general goal, but life is not the smooth unfolding of an idea but a series of adjustments to unforeseen events. If one started a life from the same place at a different time one would arrive at a different destination because the circumstances in which decisions were taken the first time would be different. There are no instructions to follow, only choices to be made. There is no algorithm to making paintings like Brown's just as there is no algorithm to living a life. The whole is a function of rules that emerge in response to concrete problems (of composition or action) that arise within the process itself. No one can extract the rules according to which any of these heads were painted in order to duplicate them exactly, just as no one could live your life simply on the basis of information gleaned from external observation alone.

Brown focuses on the head as the bearer of individual identity, but painting by erasure, constructing by smearing out and scraping off, complicates the problem of identity. Who are these heads? They have no names; they barely have faces. They are staged or posed in a way

that reminds the viewer of classical portraiture, an analogy astutely noted by Jane Young in her review of the show.⁷ Unlike classical portraits, there was no living model who sat for Brown. While some of the heads were inspired by the self-important photographs of business people in old *Who's Who* collections, we should not read too much into this origin. The heads are not political commentary; they are not attempts to “rub out” the ruling class or deflate their egos. There is no sense in which the scarping away of paint is supposed to suggest that there is some inner essence to people to be revealed once everything merely accidental has been stripped away. Their problematization of identity goes all the way down to suggest that there might not be anything more to us than the surface scrapes and cuts built up over the course of a life.

The impossibility of escape without scarring is perhaps what allows us to so readily identify the heads as human, even though they are mostly stripped of the facial features on which we focus when we identify human beings as particular people. Their near facelessness, is, I think essential to the intensity of the aesthetic charge a confrontation with the heads produces. It is not that they reveal an underlying monstrosity to human being.⁸ Their power over the viewer is initially a function of their insistence that we focus on the head as single, unified shape. Meditating on the sheer presence of the head evokes feelings for the damaged, individuated whole that each of us is. The head's haunt our visual field, they *loom* in absolute, Stoic silence. They do not ‘speak’ to the viewer, either literally or figuratively: their scarred presence alone suffices to move us. The absence of facial features eliminates the need or potential for

⁷ Jane Young, “Distinguishing Features,” *Vanguard*, 17:6, (December-january 1989, 31. She also notes, again astutely, that these heads are most definitely male, but that this fact is “the least forceful or significant of the subjects” because “most of the attributes of male officialdom have been brushed or scraped away.” There is no sense in which they suggest that humanity is identical to masculinity.

⁸ The works which followed the Heads, paradigmatically, the series *Five Portraits of a Frankenstein* and *Lazarus* do explore themes of monstrosity, I will discuss this exploration in the next essay in this series.

distracting debates about whether they are beautiful or not, whether they look like their subject or not. There is no subject behind the paintings, and the beauty or otherwise of human beings is beside the point. At the fundamental level of being human, we are material organisms that move through time and accumulate damage.



Human Head #8 (1988)

The eroded appearance of the paintings emphasizes the temporality of human being. Rocks and landscapes are worn away by time; human beings too, but we are aware of being worn away. Our existence moment to moment is both resistance to the weathering effects of time and testimony to their inescapability. The way that the heads are painted focuses our attention on these surface effects. If there is a truth to human being it is found on the surface. Nothing about the heads leads us to project a unique personality onto them: they are the record of the effects that time has wrought upon them. Each head has its own shape and appearance, but not as an effect of free will or choice but as the mechanical outcome of the sculpting effects of time. Once we have been thrown into being (Heidegger) we are subject to the inexorable dynamics of time.⁹ Being born is ultimately a death sentence, but the sentence is not executed until a certain amount of damage has been accumulated.

Nevertheless, there is nothing particularly mournful or sorrowful about the heads. They appear fixed in space, but they are not death masks: somehow, they feel very much alive. They appear alive not because there is any hint of inner mental activity but precisely because of the resolute and dignified way they confront their future. If they were traditional portraits their dignity might be called beautiful. The heads are neither beautiful nor ugly but truthful. They say: here is what a human being really is. The effects is awesome, in the literal sense of the term: fear combined with admiration at the power of that which we behold. But it is not God that inspires awe here, but confrontation with bare human reality.

The theme of endurance is emphasized by the material composition of the paintings. Paintings are not philosophical arguments but the articulation of meaning through the formal arrangement of pigment on a surface. In the case of Brown, the material is essential to the

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (New York: Harper and Row), 1962, 348.

formal arrangement: canvas could not survive the physical scarping down of the paint, and even if it could, the outcome would not be the same. The heads were painted on the surface, but the scraping, recall, is a form of drawing which, in a sense, carves the central image out of the background. That look could only be achieved by working on a hard wooden surface.



Human Head #6 (1987-2003)

In part, Brown's choice of wood was historical: he was a great admirer of medieval panel paintings and pre-Renaissance Italian painters like Giotto, Cimabue, and Fra Angelico. However, the effects achieved by his drawing by scraping technique is not at all anachronistic. Instead, it produces a strikingly novel appearance of unmatched complexity of image that can be viewed and appreciated at different scales.



Human Head # 11, detail

The heads first arrest the viewer and appear as traditional portraits with their defining features rubbed out or erased. As the viewer is drawn in to more closely inspect them the head disappears from the visual field and is replaced by micropatterns of paint that are aesthetically compelling in their own right. No matter where the gaze is focused there are multiple layers of paint stretched and stitched together in spontaneous patterns. The traditional arrangement between foregrounded image and background is disrupted at close range. It is impossible to take in the whole from close up, but the point is that the gaze is drawn in, not for forensic examination, but because the complex patterns are themselves compelling appearances. “All

painting is removal,” Philp Guston, a major influence on Brown argued.¹⁰ In Brown’s case, Guston’s point is literally true. The removal of paint transforms the singularity of the painting as portrait into a marked surface that can be appreciated at multiple scales which vary with the viewers focus. No matter how narrow our gaze, we never find simple chromatic uniformity. There is always intersection and interaction of colour and line.

The complexity of the painted surface is amplified by the fact that one never gets the sense that one is looking into different historical layers of paint. In reality, that is exactly what one is looking at: layers of paint are applied and then scraped down, but when we look at the image, in whole or in part, the paint appears to have been applied at the same time.¹¹ There is no appearance of layering or sedimentation: the brushstrokes, marks, and scrapes seem to have been applied contemporaneously. The surface is not gouged, like a Paterson Ewen painting, but retains its gessoed smoothness. The wood is essential to the final appearance of the work, but as material support for the work of painting. It disappears into the formal composition of the finished work.

2. Structure of Feeling

The awesome appearance of the heads is a function of their abstraction from any particular historical or cultural referents. They emerge—some of them barely—from

¹⁰ Philp Guston, *Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, Clark Collidge, ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2011, 296.

¹¹ I thus agree and disagree with Dault’s reading of Brown’s work as archaeological: I agree in so far as this is a brilliant characterization of the practice of image-formation by scarping down to earlier layers of paint. But I do not think that the finished works look layered, like an archaeological dig. In fact, the complexity of the images—a complexity which increases in the last decade of his career, depend upon the simultaneous perception of the interactions between the different layers of paint. Gary Michael Dault, “Painting as Archaeology,” *Globe and Mail*, Saturday, May 4th, 2001, V5.

cacophonous backgrounds that provide no details as to when the head might have lived, what it might have done, or for whom it might have cared. Even if they were not named “Human Heads” we could recognize them as human, but we could say little more about them based on what we see. This abstraction is essential to their power *as paintings*. As I noted in Part One, Brown moved away from the more illustrative and precise renderings of people that had characterized the suite of paintings that preceded the heads. Those paintings were representations of real people. But *paintings* are not representations of real people, they are transcriptions of a 3-dimensional material reality into a two-dimensional material-aesthetic reality. The movement from three dimensions to two is not a loss of one spatial dimension; it is a gain of power over the content of the visual field. The freedom of artistic creation in painting is the control the artist has over the contents of the visual field. Painting is not photography: it is not a document of that which was there, it is the production of something that the painter thinks is worth looking at, because there is more to it than we might *think*.

I stress “think” in the previous sentence because painting invites us, or draws us, to look before we think. Any painting worth looking at will also elicit thinking, but if it cannot arrest us and draw our gaze, it cannot not occasion thought. The truth of painting is indeed what you see—there is nothing more to it, ultimately, than pigment on a surface—but what there is to be seen is not immediately apparent on first glance. One must stop and really look, not for the sake of decoding it, as if the painter were painting puzzles for the viewer to solve, but to *see more* of that which is always present in the visual field, but to which we do not normally pay attention. We see human heads every day, but we do not stand in front of real people and inspect their head from different angles. By abstracting the content of the painting from social reality the artist gives us permission to tarry and examine as closely as we choose.

What do we see? *Human* heads, but with almost all identifying features obscured.

However, the practice of obscuring the typical defining features poses a question: in what does the humanity of the heads consist? There being human was clearly important to Brown. He could have titled them “heads,” or something that made no reference to heads or humanity at all. Like any art worth looking at and reflecting upon, Brown does not provide an obvious answer to the question that his paintings pose. Moreover, again like any art worth looking at, the paintings do not supply a univocal answer. The paintings are of different heads, deploy different colour schemes, and are more or less worked over and scraped down. Clearly, therefore, the heads tell us that difference is part of what it means to be human. But these differences only seem to emphasize the commonalities of the heads: they are all abstracted from their bodies, none are what we might call pretty or beautiful, all seemingly stare out, like the Moa of Easter Island, to some fate just over the horizon, all suggest Stoic immobility in relation to that fate, and none can be located in a definite time or space. Thus, what they suggest, at least from one important angle of interpretation, is that humanity consists in our ability to remain present in the face of a future that comes at us whether we want it to or not.



Human Head # 5 (1987, as numbered in the 1988 show).

It takes energy to remain in place: being human, not running away or getting lost in distractions (like adornment and decoration) is hard work. And so too is looking at these paintings. Of the Human Heads perhaps the highest compliment that can be paid to them is that they make us stop and look. They are powerful, arresting, almost terrifying images. It is impossible to look at/into them and not feel challenged: what is it you are looking at when you

look at a painting called: Human Head # x? You are not looking at a human head but a representation of a human head. Despite the rubbing out or scraping away of the facial features the paintings do not evoke any sense of violence: their stillness suggests rather peace, or at least resolve and resignation in the face of whatever comes. There is no sense that Brown has brutalized the heads but rather tended to them almost lovingly, trying to disclose through the rough treatment of the surface—which evokes the rough treatment that life on this planet dishes out to real heads—the underlying value of being human.

3. Time, Presence, Humanity

The heads are a fairly early series of paintings. Although the human body would remain a fundamental subject of Brown's work throughout his career, the Human Heads series constitutes perhaps the finest expression of the abiding humanism of Brown's art. I do not mean "humanism" in any historical sense of the term. He is not trying to update Renaissance concerns with the human form (there is nothing idealized in his representations). He is also not trying to cleanse his art of the Christian symbolism of his earlier works by advancing a boring treatise on secularism. His humanism consists in a simple but profound attending to the value of everyone's being present for the spectacle of life. Life is hard: it scars us—but it is all we have, so, like bison on the prairies who turn their heads into the freezing wind, we have to face whatever comes head on. Brown's portrayal of the heads is honest—but not brutally so—because honesty is the opposite of brutality. Truths are hard, like the wood on which the paintings are composed, but they do not damage, as true brutality always does. Only if we face life honestly can we get anything out of it.

The solidity of the positioning of the heads and fixed nature of their stares lend them a sculptural feel. Like classical busts they are alone, isolated from all community. The isolation of the heads (almost all the figures in Brown's art are alone) is the price they pay for their humanity. Humans are many and different, Brown suggests, but they are members of an absent community: joy and sorrow bring us together, but only temporarily. When we close our eyes, our thoughts, dreams, and fears are our own. We must be hard-headed to bear that aloneness. The heads *feel* heavy, like sculptures, but they are not buffed or polished like classical marbles; they lack the almost translucent glow that makes marble bust appear weightless. In comparison, the paint which composes the heads weighs almost nothing, but the images themselves seem overstuffed with matter. But they do not fall over: they have the strength it takes to hold up through life's ultimate aloneness.



Human Head #10 (as numbered in Brown's slide collection)

However, they also suggest, like classical sculpture, that much can be said about humanity by a *silent* head. Their fixity suggests that they would not tell us what is going on inside even if they could. It is not that silence is golden, but that explaining how we feel about

ultimate realities exceeds the power of verbal language. We just sit and stare at things whose ultimate truth is ineffable. The heads testify to these truths-- alienation, isolation, and the strength to bar what is coming, death. Death is what is really out there over the horizon, and the heads know it. But they do not flee or turn away, and that is their ultimate triumph over it: as terrifying as the thought of not-being here is, we can bear it: the value of our humanity is proven by our rising above fear to embrace life as it really is.

Unlike the early drawings, in which working bodies suggested that a human world could be constructed which isolation was at least temporarily overcome, the heads' isolation is permanent. They are human, but they lack hands: their world is inside—the thoughts they think that they cannot communicate. Outside is the on-rushing future in which the person that they represent will no longer be. But they are not persons, but paintings, and they can therefore survive. If there is a beauty to these paintings it lies in the sense of peace and serenity that their solidity suggests: they will endure; art is our collective triumph over death.

The finished work confronts us, still and silent. More than thirty years after their first showing they still have the uncanny power to function as mirrors of one's own mortality. They remain expressionistic works, if by that we mean essays in working through the artist's own unsettled fears and feelings. But they would be thin philosophical broth if they did not work as paintings first. In the same interview I quoted in the first section, Guston adds that "a painter dies when he is through investigating."¹² The investigation does not concern how to express feelings with paint: if that was all that there was to it, anyone could be a painter simply by painting down how they felt at a given moment. Painters investigate how to apply (and remove) paint from a surface. Every painting is therefore an attempt to solve the problem of how to

¹² Guston, *Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, 297.

arrange the materials: once the artist stops treating the beginning as a problem their practice becomes routine, and the art dies. Brown's art could have died in the crisis of the mid-1980s, but he found the courage to pose to himself the problem of painting anew and the first fruits of that problematization of his practice were the Human Heads series.