

Distinguishing Features

Jane Young, *Vanguard*, 17:6 (December-January, 1989), p. 31

The dignity of John Brown's "Human Heads" invites identification of their subjects. Of the eleven paintings which constitute the exhibition, three immediately looked familiar to me. Trying to pull the originals to the surface from my store of visual memory, to tie even one of the panels to a known image, pressing to link recognition to remembrance, took a good while. There are of course no definitive sources for "Human Heads". Brown used numerous images as a starting point for each painting: photographs of his brother; illustrations from medical texts; portrait photographs of corporate appointment announcements from the business section of the newspapers; and the 1926 and 1956-57 editions of *Who's Who in Canada*. But even the artist's own assurance of the banality of his sources cannot fully extinguish that sense of encountering something famous and familiar. "Human heads" operate on recognition, not of individuals or particular depictions of them, but of complex structures of format, genre, art historical reference, and transgressions of those categories.

"Human Heads" are 1.5 x 1.25 metre plywood panels which Brown gessoed and painted in oils, tempera, and encaustic. His palettes vary from the deep green and stark white of *Human Head #9* to the murky browns and greys of *Human Head #1*. The colours are mostly sombre without being earth tones, enlivened with occasional sweeps of intense hues. The paintings were made over long periods of time: painted, scraped down, rested, resurrected, and reworked again and again. Pediments of chins which changed position, of shoulders which grew and shifted seep through the scumbled surfaces. It is as if Brown himself rubbed away layers of accretion trying to reveal the resemblance which must surely lie beneath.

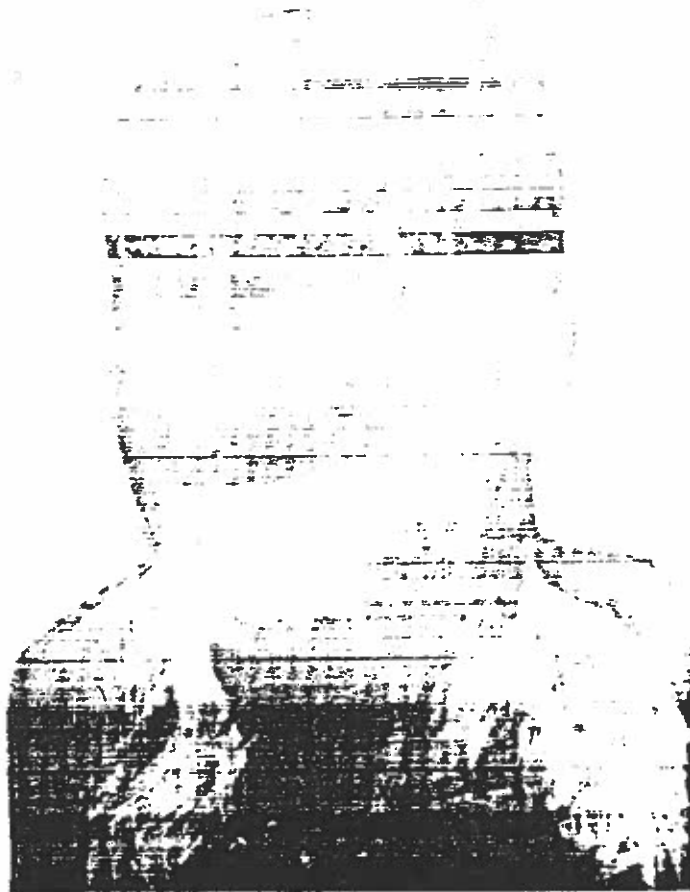
"Human Heads" share some of the characteristics of the genre of portrait painting. The subjects are men shown as head and shoulder busts, painted in the authoritative medium of oils, and of a size standard for commemorative portraits of founders and chief executive officers. Although Brown states that some of the panels started out as images of women, the finished series is clearly exclusionary on the basis of gender. Conventions of pose and authoritative posture may not have been conveyed as convincingly with female subjects. Yet it is precisely this sense of distinguished presence and importance which Brown so effectively undermines.

The maleness of "Human Heads" is the least forceful or significant character of the subjects. Most of the sartorial attributes of male officialdom have been brushed or scraped away, although vestiges of a wing-tipped collar and bowler tie remain in *Human Head #6*, and eyeglasses in another. The faces are often open-mouthed and slack-jawed. The subjects seem younger than the array of late middle-aged and elderly types one would expect, for instance, in a group of university professors. And they are almost all hairless. This baldness and Brown's forward placement of the figures in relation to the picture plane lends the subjects a vulnerability which is at odds with the portrait formats. Brown controlled his broad painting to render these naked skulls with subtle palpability. The figures are distinctive without being distinguished by social or economic status.

Recognition comes as well from the art historical evocations which inevitably accompany these paintings. The most obvious references are Francis Bacon's *Head I* of 1948-49 and *Study for a Portrait II (after the death mask of William Blake)* of 1955. Bacon often left traces of features which changed position during the execution of a work. Brown added a lacy white collar to *Human Head #4* which seems to echo Velasquez, an important source for Bacon is well. The gaping mouths of some of Brown's figures trigger memories of Goya's *Deux Femmes Riant*, the studies of asylum inmates by Géricault, and even of Degas's drawings of murderers. Brown's concentration on the shapes of the skulls might appear to refer to Lavater, phrenology, and the whole late nineteenth-century realist program for defining racial and social characterization by acute physical observation. But "Human Heads" makes no attempt to portray character, nor to depict the physiognomic basis of criminality as in Degas. They do not possess the degree of distortion of Velasquez, the savagery of Bacon, nor the grotesque fascination of Goya. A comparison of Brown's nude wrestlers from his 1984 exhibition with Bacon's treatment of a similar subject in *Two Figures* of 1953 makes the differences apparent. Where Bacon saw beastliness, Brown sees an awkward vulnerability. When Brown evokes

the works of other painters, the echoes are formal and fleeting, used as much to undermine the comparisons as to summon them.

Brown concentrates on postures and artificial poses, features which drew him initially to the formality of the newspaper and *Who's Who* photographs. Features which are not as slight an interest as they may at first appear. Minute differences of pose are the principles by which Gerhard Richter organizes and installs his *Forty-Eight Portraits*. The painted version was displayed at the Art



John Brown, *Human Head #7* (1987-88), oil, tempera, wax on plywood, 152 x 122 cm. photo: courtesy Carmen Lamanna Gallery

Gallery of Ontario this past summer just as Brown would have been finishing "Human Heads". Although Richter's subjects are identified, labelled, and famous, his interest in these depictions is ultimately, as Roald Nasgaard wrote in the catalogue, "an issue of pictorial quality". Where *Forty-Eight Portraits* addresses systems of classification, "Human Heads" are less overtly conceptual in intent: they defy our urge to label, classify, and hence to possess, an urge which Richter's piece satisfies unequivocally.

"Human Heads" are distillations as a function of content and process. Each image was made from a variety of sources and from Brown's visual memory. Each was worked on and worn away over long periods of time. Brown's painting style is distinctive. He produces images which are powerful, intriguing, and memorable. Yet, they are only anatomical studies. Despite the immediacy provided by the forward thrust of the figures in "Human Heads", they offer no readings as to emotion, state of mind, character, class, or profession. They are vaguely male, somewhat youthful figures with beautifully shaped heads and a subdued dignity. They offer acquaintance, a sort of recognizability somewhere between the familiar and the anonymous.

John Brown, Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto
September 17 to October 13