

The Infinite Without and Within: Brown's Final Period 1

The works of Brown's early and middle period were characterized by his focus on the human body, head, and face. For the first ten years of his career his efforts were divided between minimalist figure drawings in heavy grease pencil and large-scale paintings, often hung as panelled series. The earliest paintings were openly influenced by Goya, Bacon, and Christian iconography. The earliest panel paintings were massive and haunting, the figures glowing with an eerie inner light emphasised by the dark, often industrial or carceral background structures. Drawing dropped out of his practice, but until the early 2000s the thematic focus of his works was the isolated, labouring, alienated, and anxious human body. Formally, the early and middle works grappled with problems of how to represent the human figure: how much can the artist strip out of depictions of the body, head, and face, and still leave behind a figure recognizable as human? What are the effects of introducing distortions into the depiction of the figure? How does an audience respond to a painted face whose features have been smeared and scrapped down? The building up-scrapping down technique for which Brown would become known were the results of these formal experiments in painting the human figure.

Human identity and anxieties would remain a central focus of Brown's work until his death in 2020. However, there is a noticeable turn in the period which begins in 2003-4 towards explorations of more machinic and architectural objects. This turn was not preceded by a crisis similar to that which he experienced in the mid-1980s, when he withdrew from the scene for two years and returned with his masterful Human Heads series. Nevertheless, there are noticeable differences of form, content, mood, and atmosphere in these works. His final exhibition of paintings devoted exclusively to the human body consisted of a series of ten almost playful, brightly coloured gouache on paper "Partial Self-Portraits."



Partial Self-Portrait #2 (2002-2003) Gouache on paper, 29.75×27.5

With the exception of the on-going and in some ways anomalous Grimm series, Brown's output after that 2001 exhibition would intertwine often nostalgically named portraits of friends and loved ones with massive, ominous, severely worked-over panels in which the human presence has been replaced by foreboding structures and threatening machinery. I will explore the Grimms and the machinic paintings in the final two essays in this series. Here I want to focus on the more abstract panels that he painted during this final period. I will argue that these represent the high point of artistic achievement in Brown's career. Formally unique and powerful to view, they have no analogue in the history of twentieth and early twenty-first century Canadian (or

world) painting.¹ One can see in them the straightforward development of the building up-scraping off technique, but the practice is pushed to such extremes that the best examples of this final period of work are singular, *sui generis* achievements.

This exploration will focus on both the formal developments that emerge in Brown's final period and the aesthetic-emotional impact this subset of paintings has on viewers. In the first section I will examine the techniques through which Brown achieved the arresting complexity of the images. Brown insisted that his paintings were always figurative, but the best examples of the final period of work pushes beyond the traditional relationship between figure and ground towards what I called earlier "total painting."² In the concluding section I will focus on the emotional-aesthetic power of these paintings. If the early and middle period confront viewers with the existential problems of being a fleshy, finite being, these final paintings open our senses towards an infinite space of physical forces and elements outside of ourselves from which our lives have emerged while at the same time drawing us into the infinite depth of experience within ourselves.

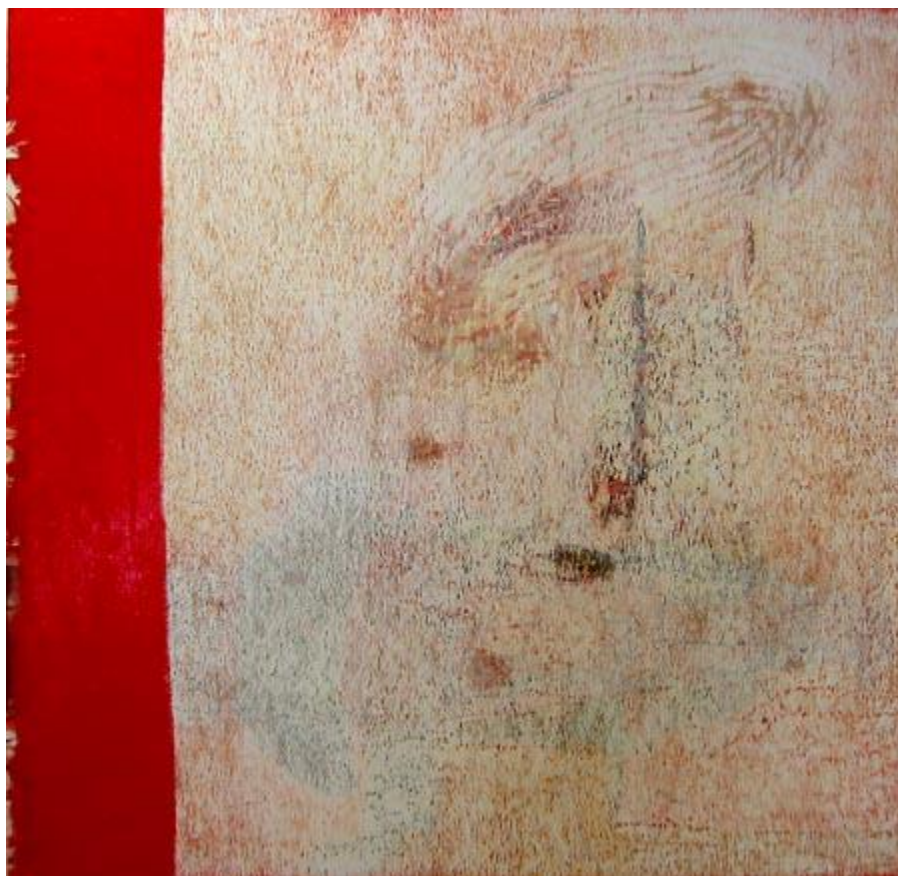
I: The Distressed Image

The period in question begins with the "Thing, Nothing, Something" cycle of paintings, shown at Olga Korper's in 2003, and ends with two of Brown's final paintings, "Poe" and "Abandoned Desert Town" from 2019. Other exemplary works from this period include "Home" (2010), "Jack (but not Me)," (2010), "Brontosaurus" (2010), "Tower Version One"

¹ Unfortunately, the gate keepers of Canada's major national galleries have been slow to recognize the brilliance of these works. Widely privately collected, they are not represented in the collection of the National Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario, or other major public galleries in the country.

² See Jeff Noonan, "Heads, No faces: brown's Human Heads Series (1985-2003)" [www.johnbrownarchive.ca \(https://www.johnbrownarchive.ca/wp-admin/heads%20.pdf\)](https://www.johnbrownarchive.ca/wp-admin/heads%20.pdf)

(2007-8), “Tower Version Two (2007-2008) and a series of massive paintings named for future dates: “October 13th, 2082” (2005-2006), “November 14th, 2077” (2005-2006), “May 3rd, 2064” (2005-2006), “March 19th, 2074” (2005-2006), “July 23rd, 2037 (2005-2006), “July 8th, 2046 (2005-2006), December 30th, 2106” (2005-2006), “June 17th, 2022,” (2006-2007), “February 4th, 2033,” (2008-2009), and “May 26th, 2021,” (2009). All are distinguished by the “distressed” appearance of the images and backgrounds.³



Thing (2003-04) oil on wood 72×72

This most apt description was coined by *The Globe and Mail* critic Gary Michael Dault in his review of the Future Date Series show in 2006. After John Bentley Mays, Dault was Brown’s

³ Gary Michael Dault, “Distressed” *The Globe and Mail*, January 9th, 2006.

most perceptive and insightful critic. Through patient observation of Brown's works and numerous studio visits and discussions, Dault built up a unique understanding of Brown's works that centred on the visual and psychological effects achieved by Brown's technique. Dault did not chart the increasingly severe working over of the painted surface that defined Brown's trajectory from the Human Heads to the end of his career, but he continually found the right metaphors to express its results.

Dault grasped that the key to understanding these works was the way in which they reversed the traditional process of figurative painting. Traditionally, an image would be sketched and then patiently built up towards a fully resolved picture by deliberately adding of layers of paint. A more uniformly painted background served as a foil to emphasise the central character, the subject of the painting. In Brown's case, the entire painted surface became the subject. Instead of using the background only to help the viewer concentrate on the central thematic figure, Brown's final series questioned the distinction between figure and ground by scraping away layer after layer of paint to achieve total paintings of unparalleled complexity. The final result owes as much to the remnants of a quasi-industrial scraping off process as brushwork. "Brown's beautiful paintings," Dault observed, "are survivors of his own painting process."⁴ The paintings remain figurative, but the background does not simply set off the central figure but is visually compelling in its own right.

⁴ Gary Michael Dault, "John Brown at Olga Korper," *The Globe and Mail*, Saturday, April 26th, 2003, R14.



Nothing (2003-04) oil on wood 72×72

As Robert Motherwell observed, most people believe that a painting (or any art work) begins in the imagination of the artist and the completed work is the straightforward result of “painting down” the image the artist conceived.⁵ Abstract expressionism contested this common sense understanding by dispensing with representation of the concrete figure as the goal of painting. Brown also contested this understanding. While he remained a figurative painter, his works did not begin with a “picture-thought” in his imagination that he then tried to translate into a material expression. Instead, from the Human Heads series on, his works most often began

⁵ Robert Motherwell, “On the Humanism of Abstraction: The Artist Speaks,” *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, Dore Ashton and Joan Banach, eds., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 255.

with a photograph that he would happen across (in newspapers, old medical books, or art historical publications). Brown would staple the photograph to the wall next to the panel and begin applying broad swaths of paint at random.



Photographs, 401 Richmond Studio

Anyone looking from the outside on the first step in the process would have no idea what the painting was “about.” Brown did not sketch the image in the photograph but simply layered colour on the surface. The works could look quite spartan at the outset: patches of colour floating in a sky of white gesso. Gradually, over many iterations, a central figure would begin to resolve itself against a complex background of angular, polychromatic striations of paint. The process would continue, as Dault said, “until Brown and the painting agree that enough is enough and the process is over.”⁶ Like Motherwell, Brown did not simply “paint down” a mental image of the photograph, he *worked out* a result by *working over* the paint on the wooded surface. These paintings thus have the undeniable appearance of being art *works*.

Brown’s process from the Human Heads until the end of his career might be called dialectical and evolutionary. I am using “dialectical” in its original Greek sense: a back and forth dialogue organized by a shared problem that leads towards a resolution not by executing a preconceived plan but by mutual agreement of the contending parties. Dault’s explanation of how the paintings attain completion implies this sense of dialectical: Brown proposes a solution by applying and scraping off paint, and the resulting surface “responds” by showing itself as needing more work. The achieved plateau suggests where the next layer should go and what should be scraped off.

⁶ Dault, “John Brown at Olga Korper,” R14.



Title: *Untitled*
Dimensions: *150.2 cm x 152.2 cm*
Medium: *Oil On Wood*

Thing, early stages

Brown would judge different parts of the painting finished before the whole. Gradually, through this open-ended back and forth of application and evaluation the final painting would resolve itself and Brown would deem it complete. He would solicit the opinions of other artists and visitors to his studio, but only he could say when a painting was done. There was no abstract rule that he or anyone could apply to make that determination.

I mean something similar by the term ‘evolutionary.’ Evolution is a process of unplanned emergent complexity. Living organisms have developed out of the simple chemical

elements present on earth. Looking back, this process can be divided into qualitative milestones of development: the emergence of self-replicating amino acids, then proteins, cells, cellular nuclei, multicellular organisms and so on towards social self-conscious life-forms that can reconstruct an aimless process as meaningful. Evolutionary development is not guided by any goal, but each (retrospectively determined) level of complexity creates the conditions of possibility for still more complex emergences. However, if the initial conditions had been even slightly different, the most likely result would have been that life on earth would either not have evolved or have taken very different shapes. So too Brown's paintings. The photographs from which they usually began were not an external telos that he then sought to replicate in paint. They served more like prompts or suggestions, but what the painting that would result would look like would have been impossible for anyone, including Brown, to say at the outset. The next step following the initial random application of the first layers of paint would suggest itself to Brown only after reflection. More paint would be added, some scraped off until a certain visual logic emerged. This logic did not mechanically determine the next steps, but it did make some moves possible and rule others out. Again, which of the indeterminate number of possibilities was actually chosen could not be specified in advance of the move that Brown chose to make. At some point the overall surface attained, in his view, a global coherence, and the painting was finished.

The resulting paintings looked like nothing else in Brown's *oeuvre* and nothing else in 20th or 21st century painting. As I have noted, Dault's metaphor of "distressed images" is apt, and in both senses of "distressed." They appear weathered, eroded, victims of the ravages of time, but also emotionally distressed, aware of the effects of physical forces and time on people and their lived environments, agitated and anxious at the corrosive effects of the passage of time.

And yet, they are stoic in the face of these forces. As the Human Heads stared resolutely into a future they could not prevent from happening, so too these very different looking paintings stand resolutely for the enduring power of human creations. Despite their extraordinary complexity and the agitated appearance of the striated backgrounds, they are also surrounded by an aura of peace and silent endurance. Dault's reading of the paintings of the 2006-7 show captures the aura they exude perfectly: The "pale yet strangely earthy colours shimmer and breath in a way that is almost indecently absorbing and, thereafter, quite inexplicably moving."⁷ Brown himself was aware of this stoic quality, arguing of the paintings named after future dates that all art is a revolt against time and a hope for the future: "Each painting inherently promises that there will be a future."⁸



December 30th, 2106 (2005-2006) Oil on Wood, 84x84

⁷ Dault, "Distressed."

⁸ *Ibid.*

In appearance, these paintings more than any others in Brown's body of work are artefacts of their own history, remainders of the physical acts by which they were constructed and analogues of the physical elements that compose us and the forces that wear everyone and everything down. But nothing goes under easily: they have been scraped down to the gesso but flecks of paint remain, testimony to a now absent but once present whole. Like the effect of physical forces on human constructions, the structures that Brown sculpted from his oils could not be reproduced exactly as they turn out. All artistic creations are singularities, even if skilled forgers can reproduce some works with remarkable accuracy. One could of course learn to paint using Brown's techniques and thus produce works that resembled the best of the paintings of this final period. But since there are no abstract rules to follow, no individual work could be replicated in precise detail because the details are emergent products of a living process. This life pulses through the works when we stand back and view them as wholes, but they also exert a power that inexorably draws us closer. The painting changes the more closely the viewer attends to it. No matter where one focuses their attention one will find (unintended) aesthetic wholes within the whole that evoke a sense of the infinite.

II: The Infinite Without and Within

Between 1954 and 1955 Philip Guston painted a series of works that are perhaps the closest analogues to Brown's final period paintings. Guston was an acknowledged influence on Brown, but this influence comes through mostly in the more playful and blotchy Grimm series paintings. I cannot say whether these mid-1950's paintings played any direct role in shaping Brown's goals in his final period, but Guston's *Painting* 1954 and *Zone* 1954 express an analogous relationship between the parts and the whole. The figure is a condensation of small brush strokes that increase in density as one moves from the edges to the centre.



Philip Guston, *Painting*, 1954, Oil on Canvas, 63 1/4 x 60 1/8

Commenting on *Painting*, the music critic Alan Rich remarks upon the unique way in which the painting changes depending upon one's position in relation to it. From afar, one's gaze is attracted to the central image, which appears 'as an inert mass of crimson fog—a 'palpation of color,' as Hughes describes it—coalescing from out of a blue-greenish background." However, as one approaches, "the fog reveals itself as a vast complex of living organisms, infinitesimally small, meticulously controlled brushstrokes crossing one another at carefully planned angles."⁹

⁹ Alan Rich, "Liner Notes for Morton Feldman's 'For Phillip Guston,'" Bridge Records, 1997.

Like these Guston works, Brown's paintings appear radically different depending upon one's proximity to the piece, and for analogous formal reasons. The closer one gets, the more the details of the process of composition become apparent.

However, varying one's perspective on these paintings also changes the emotional valence of their reception. From afar, the paintings appear sombre and still, but their large scale gives them a looming presence. Viewed as wholes they are not unsettling for the viewer but can produce an almost meditative effect. This meditative effect gives them an iconic quality. The way in which the central figure emerges from the harshly scraped background is reminiscent of the eroded frescoes of Cappadocia which Brown viewed on a trip to Turkey.



Cave Fresco, Cappadocia, Turkiye

These were preserved in his memory by the photographs that he took and in a magnificent volume of reproductions that his partner Herb Sigman purchased on the trip. I do not know if

Brown was consciously trying to reproduce the effects of time and the elements on the frescoes in the works composed after his trip, but they evoke the same sort of reverential feeling that even non-believers have in response to religious art of great age and fragility.



Towerversion 1 (2007-2008) Oil on Wood 120×144

Especially when the gallery is silent, the paintings compel profound reflection. These paintings literally stop people in their tracks. Having captured the viewer's attention, they beckon the viewer to come closer.

As one moves towards the painting one's attention shifts to the details of the background and brushwork and new sets of feelings take shape. It is as if the painting is drawing the viewer into itself, into the process of its own composition. One may or may not understand and appreciate the painterly work that defined that process, but at the level of affective response to the work the viewer feels as though they are being drawn into some elemental natural dynamic:

the emergence of structure and form from random collisions between particles. As we shift attention, we change the scale of what we are seeing: our attention divides the larger work into smaller segments; closer attention divides that smaller area up again. The paintings achieve—unintentionally, or course—a fractal appearance of wholes nested within wholes nested within wholes. No matter how narrow a slice the viewer concentrates upon something aesthetically compelling presents itself.



December 30th, 2106 (2005-2006) Oil on Wood 84×84



December 30th, 2106 (2005-2006) Oil on Wood 84×84 (detail)

The statuesque appearance of the surface regarded as a whole reveals itself as an energetic movement of paint-particles vectoring towards the figure that forms the focal point of the wide-angled view. But the truth of the painting is neither the whole as viewed from afar nor the detailed striations produced by the scraping process when viewed up close but the dynamic relationship between them. Each focal point could become its own painting. (In fact, Brown did compose a series of small works by randomly cutting larger paintings that he felt were not working. These paintings—the *Small Autopsy* series—were never exhibited but given to the female members of his family as Christmas presents).



Small Autopsy (for Josie Watson)(2007) Oil on Wood 7.75×5.5

More so than even Guston's intimations of the dynamic complexity underlying all structure, Brown's paintings evoke a sense of the infinite outside of and within the self.

As the viewer moves closer to the panel more and more complexity is revealed. The background is no longer a mere foil against which the figure appears in sharper relief. Like abstract expressionist works, Brown's later works are total paintings. No part of them is merely instrumental but all equally contribute to overall effect. But in the works in question here it is difficult to say from up close what is part and what is whole. I am trying to capture this indeterminacy and living dynamism with the term "infinite within and without." As we narrow our focus on different parts, they transform from parts into aesthetic wholes. Rather than lose coherence or cease to compel our interest we constantly discover micro-arrangements of paint flecks, scarping mark, and the gesso underneath that attain their own expressive power. But as the painting sensuously draws us in, it also provokes the thought that it is confronting us with something primal and fundamental: the accretion of paint in the centre signifying the emergence of structure, order, and purpose out of the random geometry of moving particles. From afar one sees an overarching unity, from up close the painting bristles and moves. In order to fully appreciate them, one must constantly adjust one's perspective. The painting as a fixed and completed entity invites the viewer to dynamically resolve it into an infinite number of different appearances, paintings within paintings.

There is something of the sublime in these paintings. Kant argued that the sublime, in contrast with the beautiful, confronts the viewer with a "representation of limitlessness" which

simultaneously pleases and terrifies.¹⁰ The person stands safe on the shore and looks out to the ranging sea. They feel drawn into it even as he shudders in fear at the thought of how it would pulverise them. Building on Kant's analysis, Lyotard interprets the sublime as a confrontation between the human viewer and inhuman forces. Commenting on Barnett Newman's "Here" sculpture series, "Not Over There, Here" painting, and essay "The Sublime is Now," Lyotard argues that the sublime "alludes to something that can't be shown" but which nevertheless seizes the viewer.¹¹ Hence the sublime is essentially a temporal experience, an experience of the "now" which, in ordinary experience constantly drains away into the past and opens out towards the future. When we experience the sublime we stop. "The inexpressible does not reside in an over there" Lyotard continues, "in another word or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens. In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the "it happens" is the paint, the picture."¹² I believe that Brown's paintings make complete sense when judged in these terms. As complex and rich as they are, they seem to refer to some elemental energy behind the painted surface, something which the artist has tapped into but which he cannot control and which completes itself only when—and every time that-- a viewer is stopped in their tracks and made to look. The sublime is indeed, as Newman argued, "now," a moment outside the flow of temporal experience in which consciousness is dominated by the painting and led deeper and deeper into the mysteries of its appearances.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, James Creed Meredith, trans., (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1978, 90.

¹¹ Jean Francois Lyotard, "The Sublime is Now," *The Inhuman*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1991, 89.

¹² Lyotard, "The Sublime is Now," 93.



Abandoned Desert Town (2018-19) Oil on Wood 78 x 72

The inhuman dwells within each of us as the forces and elements that compose our bodies. We depend upon them for life but in themselves they think nothing, feel nothing, and are indifferent to whatever compound in which they are temporarily parts. Where we see coherent structure and stability, they are spinning and dancing in unceasing motion. This eternal creative motion is the “not shown” gestured at by Brown’s anxious scrapes completing themselves in the “now” of each encounter with an audience. And although there is the moment of sublime terror

where we confront the raw physical forces that constitute our bodies and its environment, there is also the supreme pleasure of feeling safe on the shore watching the tempest out to sea. Perhaps the “indecent” of the beauty that Dault felt in the presence of these paintings is a function of this conflict between the raw physicality of the image (there is no face to look back at us nor any hint of a human presence) and our self-conscious awareness of being drawn into them.

The confrontation that they provoke between our self-conscious awareness and their silent, stoic indifference to our presence gives these paintings their unique power. At the same time, the structures that form the central images are not themselves menacing. They lie on the border between the contoured shapes of organisms and the hard lines of architectural ruins. The same cannot be said for the majority of paintings that Brown produced in his final period. While there were some excellent works with human figures or the traces that they leave behind as the subject, a number of the most outstanding are meditations upon the machine as the enemy of life. These paintings, I will argue in the final essay of this series, give voice to one of Brown’s major political anxieties: repressive control of human desire. The terror that they inspire is not sublime because the danger that their objects pose is not abstract but very real: the power that the tools of surveillance and repression pose to vulnerable human beings. Thematically, if not in appearance, they harken back to Brown’s early grease pencil drawings of people imprisoned in camps and factories. Compositionally, they are, like the paintings I have been discussing here, the highest expressions of his mature technique. Whereas the early drawings depicted people who were the victims of the decisions of other people, here the police agent and the boss disappear behind a machinery of control. They do not point an accusatory finger at any nameable group but instead depict an “architecture of dread” within which our actions are (perhaps unknowingly) confined.

Together, these works comprise one of the most outstanding achievements of twentieth and twenty-first century Canadian painting. That which Dault says of the Future Date Series could be applied with equal truth to all of the paintings of his final series: “the pictures seem to be positioned somewhere between geology and theatre. In each of them, there are intractable stretches of surface. Onto these stretches of surface there have been introduced certain pictorial events—one might almost think of them as figure-like coagulations of paint.”¹³ At times supple like the contours of flesh, at other rigid and cold as metal, the paintings of Brown’s final period are clearly of an age in which the human and the machine are more and more interpenetrating. Nevertheless, born of the problems of their era, they cannot be reduced to mere commentary on its anxieties. Their massive scale and infinite complexity do not exactly soothe, but they make us conscious of the eternal within which we move but for the briefest of moments. They promise a future, but remind that no one of us will be present for its full unfolding.

¹³ Gary Michael Dault, “Grace and Travail: The Paintings of John Brown at Olga Korper Gallery,” *dArt International*, Fall, 2006, p. 39.