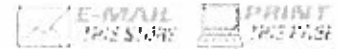


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April 28, 2001

**This punk lived on**  
The scene came and went, but John Brown kept painting

**John Bentley Mays**  
National Post

"I have no pretension to invent something new," Paul Gauguin wrote his wife. "What I am coveting is a still unknown corner of myself."

Gauguin also coveted notoriety. Thinking gossip meant sales, he flamboyantly betrayed old friends, lied about everything and decamped to Tahiti after dumping his family. Degas admirably called him a wolf who'd rather starve to death than be collared. To get called a crazy animal by old man Degas! How much better does it get?

Gauguin did not know, and might not have cared, how sharply his Tarzan stunt would narrow and even endanger the future appreciation of his work. He was fortunate to have a few strong defenders -- collectors and other painters, especially -- to keep an accurate memory alive.

In contrast, almost all the painterly wild boys who jumped in our face out of the punk-rock scene circa-1980, have vanished. After a short walk on the wild side, the art-world intelligentsia decided they were just so many no-talent, ripped black T-shirts. Anyway, painting was too bourgeois for the fashion-setting Marxist art pundits. Whereupon the painters were banished to the basement of hell.

The painter John Brown, now 48, came out of Toronto's Queen Street punk scene. When the scene went down, he went down.

Many painters afflicted by pretension and hankering for notoriety accepted the obscurity suddenly visited upon them and stopped working forever. Mr. Brown was different. If he played freaky music back then, he never played Gauguin's jungle-boy publicity card. Since the first time I saw and wrote up his painting, almost 20 years ago, he has been the painter described in Gauguin's letter: in deep dialogue with the history of painting and blessedly free of the exhausted avant-gardist "pretension to invent something new."

And, as we find in the large, rugged new oils on wooden board opening today at Olga Korper Gallery, his urgent mission continues to be the discovery and uncovering of "a still unknown corner" of his body, self, soul.



Yvonne Berg, National Post

**JOHN BROWN IN HIS STUDIO: His latest paintings are oil on wood, and they go deeper than any of his previous work.**

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This mission was launched in Mr. Brown's defective, unresolved portraits and early tableaux of struggling men. There, he contemplated and sought to portray the experience of being inside a vulnerable, passionate body under the most extreme duress. Here, he goes deeper under the skin, probing zones of interior life inaccessible to him until now. The visible anatomy of the organism has been stripped away. We now see the dark architecture of the inner body, where ideas, fluids, feelings are stirring and seething every moment we are alive -- driving us, drawing us.

Mr. Brown typically visualizes these facts of incarnate consciousness by running brushed veils and drizzles of grey or fleshy rose or clay brown over the expanses of wood, then scratching away flakes and swatches -- then repairing the wreckage and undoing the repairs, again and again. Some pocked, injured planes are left open, lacerated. Others are decorated with tattered expanses of short, crude strikes of paint that could be words in some language (like the genetic code) with meanings we can guess at but not really read.

In its large movements of tilting toward shadow and falling toward light, the composition of each painting suggests still more intricately entwined organic processes -- opening and closing, forgetting and remembering, losing consciousness in sleep, waking.

In fairness to John Brown, I should say he believes almost nothing I've just written. The paintings are fields of creation for him, he told me this week, not vehicles of message. These magnificently composed pieces aren't about anything, and most definitely not about composition in a large square.

So be it. In a world that often feels completely carpeted in grey broadloom, these beautiful, virtuoso paintings stand out starkly, jolting and involving the viewer. I have felt that jolt before in front of certain paintings by Velázquez, Rembrandt, Anselm Kiefer. The works were always icons of inwardness, leading the willing heart into the darkness of history or the body, past the lacerations and pain of the dark hours, toward light and life.

*Olga Korper Gallery, 17 Morrow; (416) 538-8220*

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