

Destroy All Monsters: Brown's Middle Period, 1989-2002

I have argued that Brown's work can be divided into four periods.¹ The first period covers his student days at the Ontario College of Art and the University of Guelph (1979-1982). The second begins when he joined the stable of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery and ends with the Human Heads Series (1989). The third, or what I am calling here the middle period, extends from 1989 to 2002. The final period stretches from 2002 until his death in 2020. For most of the middle period and all of the final period Brown was represented by the Olga Korper Gallery. This essay will focus on the six series that by and large define his work between 1989 and 2002: *Five Portraits of a Frankenstein and a Lazarus* (1989-1994), *A Delicate Family (Twelve Attempts to Paint a Human Face- For Sandra Carpenter)* (1990), an untitled series of five paintings of friends and family member's bodies (1994-1995), *Ten Attempts to Imagine the Inside of My Body* (1997-1999), *Autopsy* (1988-1996), and *Disease*, (1995-2002).

Brown refined his build-up/scrape down technique into its mature form during this period. He also continued to develop the novel approach to composition that emerged with the transformational *Human Heads Series*. *Five Portraits of a Frankenstein and a Lazarus* are the last large-scale paintings for which there is evidence that Brown used preparatory studies. These six series also cemented Brown's reputation as a painter of the human body: if any of his paintings "stink of the body" (John Bentley Mays) these are them.² I want to explore the way in which the relationship between embodiment and monstrosity links these series together. of the thematic focus on the body and his evolving painterly techniques in these six series. However, their success as paintings must be judged not in this of the thematic content alone, but rather by

¹ Jeff Noonan, "Process and Practice," <https://johnbrownarchive.ca/process-and-practice/>

² John Bentley Mays, "Answers, A Fiction." *John Brown: The Visceral Thing*, (Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art), 2008.

the ways in which the theme is evoked by the internal composition of the works. They are not essays on monstrosity; the techniques they deploy organize the painted surface in ways that *evoke* in the viewer feelings of the monstrousness of bodies. During this period Brown develops a new way of contrasting heavily worked, sometimes almost blotchy figures and smoother, more uniformly painted backgrounds. The figuration tends more and more towards abstraction, but Brown never lets go entirely of the connection to the problem of rendering the three-dimensional material body on a two-dimensional painted surface.

This paper begins with a reflection on *Five Portraits of a Frankenstein and a Lazarus*. In retrospect, this series sets the thematic tone for his work over the next decade. I do not mean that Brown planned a decade long exploration of the relationship between embodiment and monstrosity. Nevertheless, we who are able to survey the *oeuvre* as a whole can see links between the six series that were probably not present to Brown's mind when he painted them. I will thus spend some time in the first part discussing the literary background to this series in the hope that they shed some deeper philosophical light on the paintings. I will then work through each of the subsequent five series, focusing on the evolving theme of monstrosity but also on the changing and evolving practices Brown used to compose the paintings. In conclusion, I will reflect upon the contributions of this period to Brown's career as a whole. As it would turn out, these six series mark the end of Brown's defining focus on the human body. The final period would see his paintings turn (more, but not exclusively) towards architectural and machinic figures that enclose and threaten living bodies.

1. Monstrosity, Science, and Spirituality

Five Portraits of a Frankenstein and a Lazarus comprised Brown's only show at the Costin and Klintworth Gallery. After that show he would move to Olga Korper, where he would show until his death. The five panels were the same size as the *Human Heads* but the figures themselves are more ghostly and the backgrounds somewhat more uniform. As befits the subject of bodies returning from the dead, there is a macabre feel to the paintings, despite the fact that the palette is not particularly somber (fairly bright reds and blues predominate). The figures themselves are almost apparitions: they are ill-defined shapes of bodies rather than precisely rendered, identifiable figures. It would be impossible to say which represents Lazarus and which Frankenstein. But the point is not to represent either of them, but to explore through paint the problems that re-animated bodies pose for our own sense of life and death.



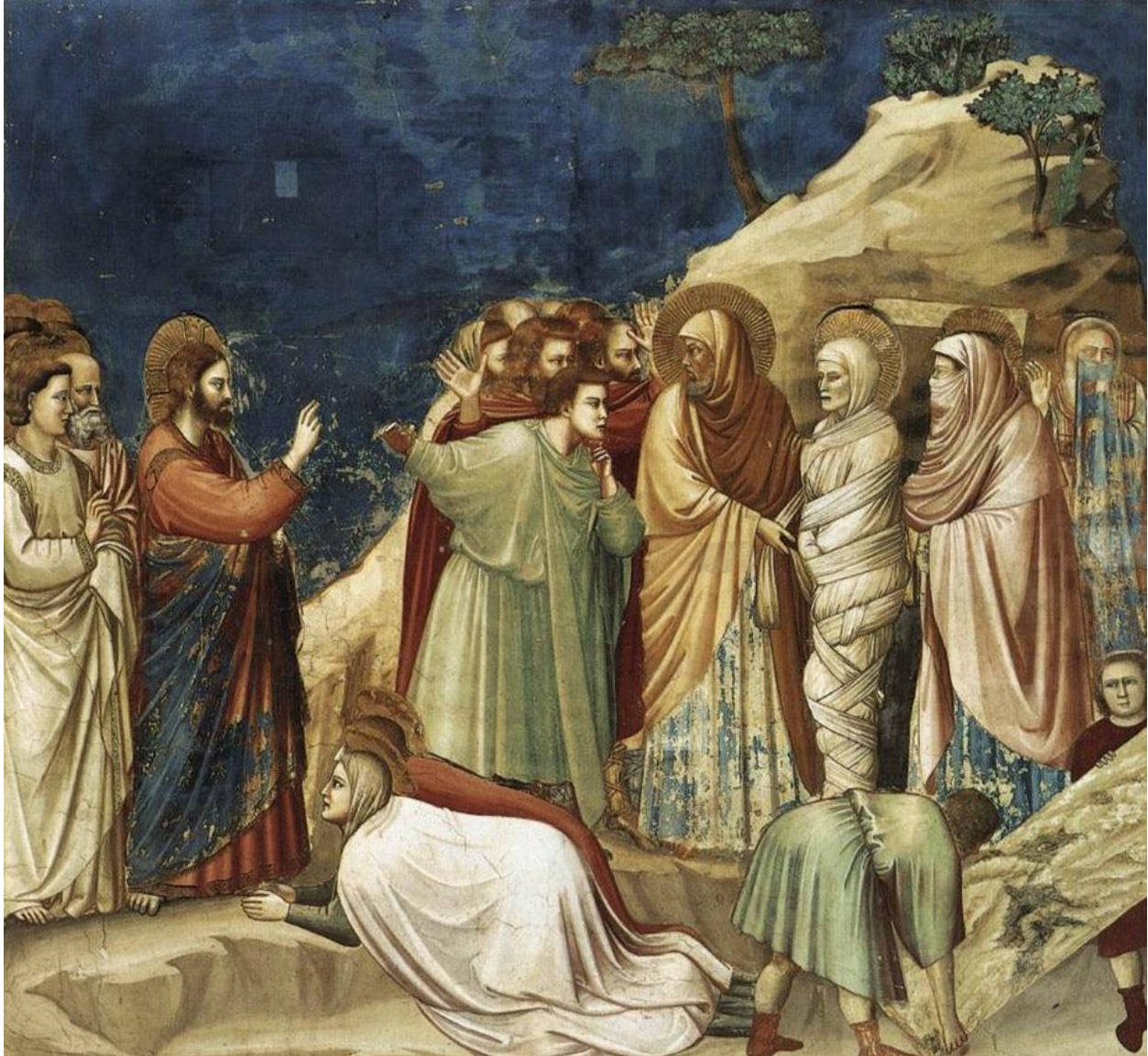
Portrait of a Frankenstein and Lazarus #1 (1988-1994) Oil on Wood 60X48

In her review of the show in the *Globe and Mail*, Kate Taylor focused on the way in which the paintings' exploration of the theme of resurrection brought the scientific into dialogue with the spiritual. Lazarus is raised from the dead by Christ the god-man, while the monster in Shelly's novel is brought to life by Frankenstein acting as man-god. "Both the Biblical story and the Gothic novel are, in a way, tales of resurrection; the man and the monster had life breathed into them by their makers. That experience is large in its implications—from the scientific optimism of the 19th century and the reproductive technologies of the 20th to the darker, less fathomable definition of life and death."³ (Taylor, Nov 8, 1993) The paintings do indeed explore the problem of resurrection, but not, I would argue, with any sense of hope that life after death might be possible, or preferable even if it were. For Brown these stories are cautionary tales warning that resurrection would be a pyrrhic victory at best. However deep of our fear of death, our hopes that God or science will rescue us from that fate are misdirected. We must learn to live permanently carrying the cross of consciousness of inescapable death.

Shelly's novel is quite clearly written with a similar cautionary moral in mind. Nature reigns supreme over human powers; the intellect might flatter itself that it has figured everything out and can reconstruct nature according to its own designs, but nature will triumph in the end, at immense cost to any modern Daedalus who thinks they can outwit it. The biblical tale of Lazarus' resurrection is less obviously a cautionary tale, but Rilke's poetic reconstruction of it in *The Raising of Lazarus*—a poem Brown knew well and I would suggest was at least in the back of his mind—evokes the deeper connection between Frankenstein's monster and the living corpse that Christ creates when he brings Lazarus back from the dead. Giotto's *Raising of Lazarus* would also have been foremost in Brown's mind when he composed these panels. As with Shelly

³ Kate Taylor, "Figure as Metaphor," *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 8th, 1993.

and Rilke, the re-animated corpse in Giotto's fresco also appears monstrous: dull, grey, still swaddled in its death shroud.



Giotto, Raising of Lazarus, c.1304-1306

Re-animated bodies, no matter whether restored to life by divine power or technological prowess, are *monstrous*. If a natural body is the result of the organized development of material according to a defined pattern (think of the development of a mature human from a fertilized egg

cell), the monstrous is a malformed body without characteristic shape and structure. The re-animated body is monstrous par excellence, because its material--flesh—takes on a form—living activity—that it should not have. Lazarus (in Rilke’s telling) and the monster in Shelly’s novel are both hideous: their re-animation could not conceal the putrefaction to which the material bodies had been subject while in the ground.

Let us look more closely at these literary inspirations for the paintings before returning to discuss the panels themselves. I will begin with Rilke. In the poem the resurrection of Lazarus is not presented as glorious miracle but as a result of Christ’s reluctant accession to the crowd’s demand. Psychologically, the tone is one of that most human of feelings, ambivalence. Morally, the tone is one of fear of the consequences of transgressing the metaphysical and moral divide between life and death. Christ himself knows that what he agrees to do is grotesque; he knows that what he is bringing back to life is not a man but a monster. “As he walked, the thing seemed monstrous to him ... all his body grieved with rejection as he gave out “Raise the stone.” Someone called out that the corpse was stinking ... but he stood erect ... painfully raised up his hand... till it stood there, shining in the gloom.”⁴ The whole of Christ’s being knows that he is not bringing a *man* back to life. Rilke emphasizes this point by referring to the resurrected body with the impersonal pronoun “it,” and having it glow with an unnatural light.

Whereas Rilke explores the ironies of the use of divine power to transgress the nature it purportedly created, Shelly’s novel examines the unnatural implications of the perfection of the scientific knowledge of nature. Frankenstein is the model nineteenth century scientist, drunk on his own power to understand natural laws and determined to prove his superiority over the mere

⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Raising of Lazarus,” *Rilke: Selected Poems*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 1964, 72.

matter from which he has evolved. The ultimate proof of his (science's) power would be to discover the secret that breathes life into physical substance. "To examine the causes of life we must first have recourse to death. I become acquainted with the science of anatomy, but this was not sufficient. I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body ... Darkness had no effects on my fancy and a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for worms."⁵ He succeeds, but no sooner did the being he created sit up than Frankenstein realizes that some barriers are meant never to be crossed. We might think that Frankenstein learns a spiritual lesson about science (the life-death boundary cannot be reverse crossed without catastrophic consequences) while Rilke's Christ learns a scientific lesson about spiritual power (giving into human demands for miracles introduces monsters and gives mortals false hopes about eternal life *on earth*).

Unlike Lazarus, whose life as a re-animated body the Gospels do not follow, we do hear from Frankenstein's monster. What he has to tell us speaks loudly to the themes of mortality and finitude. Far from the gift of life unending that Frankenstein hoped he was creating, the monster's existence is unbearable because it is alienated from all other human beings. He is alive, but it is a miserable living death without friendship and love. "Hateful day when I received life! ... Accursed creator! Why did you form me so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God ... made man beautiful and alluring after his own image ... [and] Satan had his companions, fellow-devils ...but I am solitary and abhorred."⁶ Frankenstein's mistake was to not understand that although life has material conditions (which science might one day completely understand), *living* is a spiritual practice, in the sense that it depends upon affirmative

⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly, *Frankenstein*, (New York: Scholastic Books), 1969, 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

felt bonds between people and values which are not reducible to the quantified calculations and formulae of natural science. The monster has material life, but, isolated from others that share its shape but not its nature, cannot enjoy a life worth living. Fear death as we may, Shelly is warning, good human lives depend upon our ability to reconcile ourselves to our limited share of lifetime. Life is sacred, we might say, not because we are the creatures of an all-powerful sky-god, but because the life of each of us is *unrepeatable*. Hence we must care for ourselves and each other so that our lives are as fulfilling, meaningful, and enjoyable as possible, but, when we have reached the end, we must (contrary to Dylan Thomas) go gentle into that good night, because not even the son of an omnipotent sky-god (Christ) can bring a person back to life on earth. Whatever it is that walks out of the tomb or laboratory, *it* would not be human. The desire to live forever is thus human, but the goodness of our lives depends upon our being able to master this desire and content ourselves with a limited life span.



Portraits of a Frankenstein and a Lazarus #4 (1988-94) Oil on Wood 60×48

Like Shelly's novel, Brown's paintings do not show us the monster (or Lazarus) in any detail. Their presence is evoked in ghostly images more than carefully illustrated. The paintings are moody, atmospheric; they gesture towards their subjects rather than resolve them in a fine-grained picture.



Portraits of a Frankenstein and a Lazarus (number not listed in the photograph on the CD)

(1988-94) Oil on Wood 60×48

The contrast between the appearance of the paintings and the expectations aroused by their title is jarring: the viewer wants to see the monsters, but the paintings offer only suggestions. Indeed, the figures, to the extent that they can be made out, are almost translucent—the opposite of the stinking flesh that Rilke’s poem, Shelly’s novel (and Mays’ interpretation of Brown’s work) would lead the viewer to expect. The figures are not central to the paintings: they do not attract the gaze and they evoke neither pity nor fear. The figures are parts of a whole that must be appreciated as such. The paintings thus challenge the classical relationship between background and foreground: all parts of the paintings work together to form a complex harmony; the background does not exist simply as an instrument to highlight the figure.

Both Frankenstein’s monster and the revived Lazarus come into being through the violent transgression of the boundary between life and death. However, rigid lines are absent from the paintings, and despite the scraped and scarred surfaces the tone of the paintings is more melancholy and reflective than violent. The figures seem to peacefully float in space rather than threaten.

Like the photographs from which he generally worked in this period, the literary background to the subject matter is only a starting point and not a determining factor that one must know in order to understand the paintings. Understanding the paintings is a function of being drawn into their appearance; their truth is the formal arrangement of the paint and its effect on the viewer. Like all worthwhile paintings they pose a problem: how can the subject matter be rendered in a visually compelling way? The solution is not to give the viewer hints at how the

picture can be mapped on to the story (or how the image can be traced back to the photograph) but to work out the appearance of the painting through an open-ended, back and forth, application and removal of paint until the artist feel the problem has been resolved.

The need to focus on the painted surface as a unity is emphasized by the fact that each of them portrays only a solitary figure. We are never told which is “a” Lazarus and which “a” Frankenstein. The identity of the figures is not important: Brown is not illustrating moments of their lives. The paintings are not speculative histories, the figures are not subjects of a graphic novel. They function within the painting as a whole not so much as focal points or centres as somewhat more resolved zones or work that provide unity to the painting. Combined with their relatively large size, each of the five works captivates. If they are beautiful, as Taylor argued that they were, they are so in a way that has nothing to do with classical notions of proportion and arrangement. They are beautiful in the way that human bodies are beautiful. This beauty is not, as the monster naively supposes, that our form reflects the form of the divine creator: God’s body is not scarred, wrinkled, or diseased, but all human bodies are subject to and shaped by these ailments. Brown’s stressed surfaces are an attempt to express the material realities of human beauty. They eschew Greek and Roman and Renaissance idealizations of the human form in favour of complex compositions more adequate to the vulnerabilities and dangers to which human bodies are subject. The physical results of these vulnerabilities on the meat of the human body would preoccupy Brown for the next decade.

2. A Delicate Family: Twelve Attempts to Paint a Human Face

Brown's next series moved away from the grand literary sources that motivated *Frankenstein* and *Lazarus* to the most intimate subject-matter of portraiture: the human face. However, if one expected careful tender treatment of the face one would be disappointed. The paintings are even more severely scraped and worked than the *Human Heads*. Experimental incorporation of non-traditional materials (wax, clay, torn paper) adds to the sense of the grotesque and the monstrous. The contradiction between the distortions Brown's techniques impose on "normal" faces and the intimacy suggested by the small-scale of the paintings as well as the fact that he dedicated them to his then wife Sandra Carpenter produce a jarring effect on the viewer.



A Delicate Family 12 Attempts to Paint a Human Face (For Sandra Carpenter) (1990) Oil on Wood

On one level the focus on the face is a departure for Brown. His early drawings and paintings almost always completely obscured the face, or enclosed the head in a Sidney Nolan-like black box. The *Human Heads* were notable for the fact that they were called heads, not faces. The facial features were obscured by the scraping off and smearing of the paint. If anything, the faces in these “attempts” are treated even more severely, even as the scale and dedication to Carpenter suggest that they were inspired, in some sense, by family snap shots. (In fact, Brown always loved the immediacy that Polaroid instant photographs enabled and taking candid snap shots was a favourite amusement). If one were to judge the outcomes by the standards of a real person’s face, one could only conclude that these are disfigured.



A Delicate Family (12 Attempts to Paint a Human Face) (For Sandra Carpenter # 11

(1990) Oil on Wood 23×21

But painting is figuration, not disfiguration. The normal is but the starting point for painterly creation. The painted face must be judged on its own terms and not in comparison with real people's faces. The artist is after something more than copying appearances. What might Brown have been trying to make manifest in these paintings?

On first glance, one might assume that Brown was seeking to bring out the grotesque elements of human appearances. But the grotesque implies comical distortion, and these paintings are "distortions" only if one assumes that the job of portraiture is to accurately depict persons as they really appear. If the job of portraits is, on the contrary, to draw out hidden truths about their subjects, and the subject are not actual historical people but people that the artist *imagines*, then the truths drawn out are those which the artist takes to be most essential, and the final composition take the form that the artists worked towards in order to express or embody that truth. So there can be no question of distortion; the finished paintings are true to life. However, the life to which they are true is mediated through the inner life of the imagination of the artist.

Unlike the head, the face is not just a body part but the public manifestation of the person's identity and personality. It is an emotional-ethical expression as much as it is a physical thing. When we really look into the face of another we recognize their irreducible value as finite creatures in need of care and concern. Looking into another person's face is an intimate act: we do not just go up to strangers and stare them in the eye. To *really* see another person's face is even more intimate than touch. Social life is full of occasional non-intimate touches: we place our hand on a stranger's elbow to steer them in the right direction, we high five at sporting events with the person sitting next to us. We do not gaze deeply into their eyes for no reason.

The artist is, in a sense, the person who is allowed to look deeply into the eyes of their subject, *because their subject, though human, is imaginary*. Even if—as was certainly not the case here—a real person sits for a portrait, the subject of the portrait is different from the actual person. The artist sees with a transformative eye. The result is not—even if accuracy to the real person is the goal—just a copy of the physical original. If total accuracy were the goal of portraiture then a naive photograph would do. The painted portrait is supposed to bring out something real but hidden: the deep truth of the person.

What deep truths do these attempts to paint a human face draw out? Their subjects were the pure creations of Brown's imagination. They are thus generically human, without particular analogue in the world. The truth that they try to draw out is also, I suggest generically human: the effects of time on the human face. They are not grotesque or ugly. They are, like the Frankenstein and Lazarus paintings, beautiful, but their beauty consists in their honesty: everyone is scared and scarped and contused by time, but those scars, scares, and contusions are what distinguish real human faces.



A Delicate Family (12 Attempts to Paint a Human Face) (For Sandra Carpenter # 10(1990))

Oil on Wood 23×21

There is nothing air-brushed about lived reality: if we look close enough, even the most “perfect” fashion model has a pock mark or blemish somewhere. The blemish is that which distinguishes them as human and not “just another pretty face.” Who looks closer at the world than the artist? Who strives for honest evocations of the truth of the world than the artist? These 12 attempts evoke the truth of the human face as marked inevitably and uniquely in each particular case by time.

1. Untitled Series (1994-95)

The next major series continues the theme of intimate relationship, but in a direction opposite to the tenderness with which Brown looked into the human face. Time etches the face slowly, but the body is also subject to violent traumas and medical procedures. The next major series was composed of 5 paintings, including one of the largest that Brown had painted to this point (*J.W.B's Leg*). Each alluded to various afflictions and surgeries to which family members and close friends had been subjected. The titles of the five paintings state the initials of the person involved and the area of the body. The people and the afflictions are real, but since Brown did not see fit to state their full names, I will not disclose them.

These are powerful, almost angry works, the most dramatically scraped and worked over of any up to this date. Although specific body parts are named, the paintings do not illustrate each part, but their tangled swirls and planes of paint convey the pain at the heart of surgery and amputation. If any of Brown's paintings “stink of the body” as Mays says, these are them. Their scale and severity have an almost synaesthetic effect on the viewer: you can feel the throbbing fire of neuralgia, smell the putrefaction of infection; see the red and purple of bruised and sewed

up flesh, hear the agonized groans of the sufferer. Yet, despite the violence of the subject matter and the mode of composition, these paintings are loving in the highest degree.



H.S.'s Eye, (1994-1995) Oil on Wood 49.5x 37.5

It is easy to love when the loved one is healthy. It is much more difficult to help them bear the pain of illness and trauma. These paintings are homages to the human liability to physical harm and damage, but also the human capacity to endure and overcome. True love is the bond that endures through affliction. The paintings depict the reduction of people to body parts and body parts to the objects of pathogenic invasion and medical procedures; love, the most

difficult of human connections affirms the personhood of the sufferer. If there is any redemption it will not come through the saving hand of Christ or science. As the Lazarus and Frankenstein stories reminded us, the full realization of their powers creates monsters. We are bound by time and subject to disease, but love can carry us through.

In that sense these paintings retain a connection to classical portraiture that one would never suspect from their appearance.



S.C.'s Heart (1994-1995) Oil on wood, 66 x 60

They are vivid examples of Paul Klee's dictum that art does not copy the visible, it makes visible.⁷ Thus, while they celebrate the strength of their title subjects like classical portraits, they begin a shift towards what I will call "total painting" that defined the last twenty years of Brown's career. By "total painting" I mean works that transcend the classical relationship between figure and ground, foreground and background and use the whole surface of the panel. The surface is still organized around a more or less central figure (sometimes off-centre) but the entire picture is visually compelling. There is no background against which the figure is rigidly set off but lines and flecks and swirls and accumulations of paint everywhere on the panel.



J.W.B.'s Leg (1994-1995) Oil on Wood 72X60

⁷ Paul Klee, "Creative Credo," *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book for Artists and Critics*, Herschel B. Chipp, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1968, 182.

Brown was not a fan of abstract expressionism and argued that he always remained a figurative painter, even as figure and background disintegrated into each other. I think labels serve an art historical purpose but say nothing about any particular work, so I do not want to argue over how these paintings should be classified. But there is a real connection between these works and abstract expressionist paintings in so far as both used their surfaces as total fields for composition in which all elements are of equal importance to the painting.

The total surface is thus like an explosion: the figure remains, but it is almost obliterated by the scraping off of the paint. Reds predominate in the palette; their mood is bloody, the paint seems to writhe on the panel. They are thick and opaque: life is material density and throbbing, not a veil through which we can glimpse a soul at peace. The highest virtue is endurance: life goes swimmingly, until your body is torn up by the rocky shoal you could not see. One could just open their mouth, swallow some water, and sink down into the quiescence of death, but people do not. They struggle onto the beach and hang on long enough for someone to bandage their wounds. Attending to the needs of the victim is the most important social bond, since sooner or later everyone will be victimized by their own body. Once again, Brown's paintings suggest that beauty means honesty to material reality.

2. The Final Series of the Middle Period

The final three series of the middle period: *Ten Attempts to Paint the Inside of My Body*, *Disease*, and *Autopsy* continue to explore the aesthetic means of evoking emotional responses to the body's vulnerabilities and the monstrous effects of time to cause harm. This thematic continuity is accompanied by a return to smaller scale paintings and the heightened sense of focused intimacy. Unlike the *Delicate Family* series, whose size they roughly share, we are not

so much reminded of the family snapshot as we are an x-ray or anatomical study. Brown's work had long drawn on medical textbooks for visual information and starting points and that influence is much in evidence in these series.

The influence however is not literal: the *Ten Attempts* do not paint determinate organs, no particular disease is portrayed in the *Disease* cycle, no actual corpses depicted in the *Autopsy* paintings. But the focused objectification of the body is clearly a concern. Medical science and forensics do not treat the body as a living, self-directing whole but as a series of discrete systems vulnerable to attack by definite pathogens and destined to die. I do not think that Brown consciously organized these three series as a sequence directed by the organic decline of the body from object of medical study, to diseased destruction, to forensic examination after death, but in retrospect such a sequence makes sense. In any case, intended or not, we can think these three series together as studies born on the one hand from reflection on vulnerability and mortality and on the other the medical objectification of the body's parts.

The *Ten Attempts* continue the move towards what I called above "total painting." They replace the traditional relationship between figure and ground with a conflict organized along the vertical axis between a very carefully cross-hatched and scraped figure (presumably an organ) and a wall of more uniformly painted colour.



10 Attempts to Imagine the Inside of My Body # 9 1997-1999 Oil on Wood 36.5×36

The uniformly painted field allows the greater complexity of the figure to stand out, but careful attention reveals that the colours of the contrasting field swirl and mix in visually compelling ways. The palette is rich: whites, pinks, blues, reds and olive drab. The figures themselves are of indeterminate shape, not at all carefully illustrated copies of actual organs, but more like what the ordinary person sees when they see inside a body: a slimy, palpating mess in which definite organs are difficult to discern. When it is alive, moist, and bloody everything tends to look the same to the non-surgeon. These paintings suggest that messiness without letting go of organic form altogether.

At the same time that they are evoke once again the violence of medicine (in order to see into the body, one must either bombard it with radioactive material or cut into it), there is a certain humour and playfulness to these paintings.



10 Attempts to Imagine the Inside of My Body #2 1997-1999 Oil on Wood 36.5×36

Brown had a number of large specimen jars in which he had hydrated old children's toy organs. One used to be able to buy these de-hydrated tablets which, once put in water, would grow in hearts, lungs, and other major organs. Brown experimented with leaving them permanently submerged in larger than intended jars. They grew into grotesque, almost day-glo coloured blobs which Brown found amusing. I do not believe that they formed a direct inspiration for this series, but they were an element of a reflective but bemused concern with his own aging body and its health which he translated into the language of these paintings.

Like x-rays or dissection, painting brings to light. However, that which they bring to light are not the actual organs of the body, but the imagined body. The purpose is not diagnosis but exploration of different ways that the inside might be externalized on a painted surface. In both cases, medicine and painting, self-exploration and the possibility of self-understanding are

at issue, but painterly self-exploration and self-understanding are not driven by an instrumental purpose (health, longevity) but a sense of freedom in relation to the body as subject-matter. By bringing the internal to light the artist exposes his depths to public view, asking the viewer to ask themselves in what does the inner truth of material being consist? The painted organs have no function, no optimal state of health, and yet they remain vitally connected to problems of life and death. Our capacity to act and experience, all the outer manifestations of life that form the substance of its value, depend upon the normally hidden operations of the body's organic systems.

His next series, *Disease*, can also be thought of as an attempt to make the invisible visible. Although diseases have outer forms of manifestation, they are caused by pathogens that are normally invisible to the naked eye. I do not mean that Brown used the paintings of this series as a microscope: the paintings are not attempts to illustrate viruses or bacteria. But I do think they are attempts at making visible that which we normally try to ignore but cannot. Our lives are bookended by birth and death and shadowed from the moment of birth by the possibility of disease. Some protest at the cosmic injustice of disease: how can childhood cancers be justified? More than one person's faith in an all-loving God has been destroyed by disease. But just as the painted heart does not beat, so too the painted disease does not debilitate or kill: it becomes an object for reflection, absorption in the image, pleasure. These paintings thus offer us a morally inverted picture of disease: instead of objects of fear or targets of medicalized war, diseases as subjects of these carefully crafted paintings compel and amaze.

All the paintings of this period contest the traditional lines that divide the "beautiful" from the "ugly." I do not mean that Brown tries to make diseases look pretty. I mean that Brown here, as elsewhere, contests the traditional opposition between the ugly and the beautiful

without relinquishing the connection between his paintings and that seemingly old-fashioned standard of evaluation.



Disease #2 1995-2002 Oil on Wood 48×48

Traditionally, the ugly contrasted with the beautiful as the malformed to the harmoniously formed. The *Disease* paintings, (like the other work of the middle period) lack all sense of harmonious proportion. The figures bulge and bleed across the surface, but the colours fleshy, the brush work delicate and intricate but the scarping severe. They evoke the general look of disease (the random accretion of tissue, as in a cancer) but appear almost backlit in a way that emphasizes the compelling beauty of the complexity of the figures which the intimate brushwork and scarping has produced.



Disease #4, (2001-2002) Oil on Wood, 48×48

They have a certain violent energy, to be sure, but this energy is balanced by and the calmer fields of colour against which the accretions of paint are set. They do not make the ugly beautiful; they are beautifully composed paintings that compel attention.

The disease painting are large enough (48x48) to inspire the awe of the *Frankenstein and Lazarus* series, but still small enough to evoke the photographic case studies from which Brown drew the ideas for this series. From a formal perspective, that which is most noteworthy is that they foreshadow what will become in the final phase of his career and the highest expression of his scraping technique. *Disease # 4* is particularly noteworthy in this regard. The paint is scraped away almost to the gesso, but the result is not a uniform background but a complex field

of flecks of colour that reproduce themselves at any scale. One can change one's focus, zero in closer and closer, and still find new details. When realized on a larger scale in his paintings from 2002 on, the results are astonishing and unique. I will examine those paintings in the final essay of this series.

To conclude, I will turn to the final series of Brown's middle period, *Autopsy*. Brown did not periodize his own work so there is no question of his having deliberately brought this phase to a close with so obvious a metaphor as an autopsy. Nevertheless, in retrospect, we can see that this series does indeed mark the closing of a chapter in his work, thematically and formally. From 2002 onwards architectural and machinic figures come to predominate over the human body while the scale of the paintings and the severity of the scraping increase.

The figures in the *Autopsy* paintings are completely impersonal. We cannot discern a face or project any identity on to the figures. Identity no longer matters; once we are dead we are reduced to the sliced and diced object of forensic science. Perhaps its explorations will aid future life, but for the cadaver there is only the indignity of being splayed open to the scientific gaze. The paintings completely de-personalize death. They are neither tragic nor mournful. They are as matter of fact as the corpse lying on the coroner's examining table.

Their impersonality of these paintings contrasts in a fascinating way with another set of autopsy paintings, by the Mexican artist Martha Pacheco. Brown did not know of her work, but she produced a series of extraordinary drawings and paintings of corpses at various stages in the autopsy process. However, unlike Brown's works, Pacheco's depict the face of the person on the table. The faces are equally agonized and at peace. Pacheco's paintings reclaim the dignity of the person which was perhaps not recognized in their life. There is a redemptive quality that

Brown's autopsy paintings lack, but neither idealized their subject. Their subjects are the same: the horror inspired by the objective materiality of the dead body. Once life has departed the flesh it becomes nothing more than a thing to be examined. Pacheco reminds us of the face that once identified the person while Brown' obliterates all markers of identity. For Brown, the dignity of the person lies in their activity and relationships. Once we can no longer feel, think, move, and love, we are valueless. The body in itself has no value as a memento mori of the person we once were. Pacheco sees the autopsy as a final opportunity to affirm the dignity of the person while Brown's paintings evoke the utter de-personalization of forensic analysis. Despite these differences, both evoke the macabre sense that most of us feel when we see or think of a dead body.



Martha Pacheco, Autopsy

Brown's paintings are once again smaller-scaled. The palette is dominated by blues and yellows; the mood is somber and melancholy rather than violent.



Autopsy painting # 5 1988-1996 Oil on Wood 27.75x 25

There are no bodies portrayed and we do not know who I being autopsied. The body is present by its absence, as thoughts of the life of the person must they dissect must shadow the consciousness of the forensic examiner as they confront the corpse on their autopsy table. Still, the paintings are brutally unsentimental in the way clinical illustrations of photographs are unsentimental. Neither the clinician nor the artist can do their job- documentation in the first case, evocation of what cannot be documented in the second—if they are moved by sentiment or pity. Science and art are both honest, in their own way.

These five series cemented Brown's reputation amongst other artists as a painter of unmatched originality and emotional power. Their complexity demands careful attention from the viewer, but the overall effect is emotional. They confront us with the most terrifying realities

of human life: disease, dismemberment, death. In a sense, they are like icons that inspire in the believer deep contemplation and reflection. In that sense they connect back to the religious themes of his earlier work, but absent the overt Christian imagery. What remains of religious reverence for life after the death of God is respect for our ability to endure suffering and overcome it, not through apotheosis or immortality, but dignified bearing of the crosses of embodied being.