



## John Brown



JOHN BROWN *Grimm #27*  
1999-2000 Oil, wax, varathane on  
wood 49.5 x 50.2 cm

Among the several things that poetry and painting share is a search for the inexplicable. Great poetic prose writers such as Beckett or Kafka were engaged in the struggle to say what cannot be said, and by doing so, they defined the limits of our knowledge. So it is with great poetic painters: they show us what cannot be seen, and by doing so, articulate the impossible. Robert Frost's useful adage that poetry is what is lost in translation is especially true in the case of a painter as gifted and elusive as John Brown.

Since his early gritty portraits in the mid-1980s, when we first realized that a serious painter was among us, Brown has mined a private, idiosyncratic visual terrain that consistently generates moments of exquisite painterly elegance. Many examples were to be found in his recent exhibition at the Olga Korper Gallery in Toronto, especially among the larger works such as *Grimm Grimm bigger Grimmless #1*, whose fractured picture plane is fixed to the illusory image like a phantom limb. Scraped down into a state of pictorial exhaustion, then final transcendence, the painting announces its presence with an almost painful optical splendour.

The paintings in the show imagine the interior dimensions of our own

See reverse side

carnality. They make a series of meaty windows onto a haunting corporeal reality. Compellingly beautiful, and as perfectly scary as all great pictures are, they also represent an incarnation of painting itself, both literally and figuratively. Given the status of the work of art in the age of digital reproduction, it is quite possible that painters and paintings might soon be living fetish objects. And when they are, the images that Brown

painstakingly peels out of the void will be among the most precious and coveted.

The artist resists the tempting allure of “meanings” in his painting practice. He prefers to think of the works as fields of experience hovering at the edge of a consciousness that only the paintings themselves can convey, regardless of the language we apply to them. “Painting,” Brown explains, “seems uniquely equipped to express something in a

manner that nothing else quite can.”

And so Brown does with paint what Beckett does with words: he hurts us with stark beauty while soothing with savage charm. These unabashedly romantic and hallucinatory encounters are at an optical and emotional frontier that requires us to engage in reverie as a crucial activity—as if in order to stay alive—which is what great painting is all about.

DONALD BRACKETT