

# John Brown's abstract quest for perfection

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**JOHN BROWN**, on view at the Olga Korper Gallery (17 Morrow) through October 25, with an opening reception Saturday (October 4) from 2 to 5 pm. 538-8220.

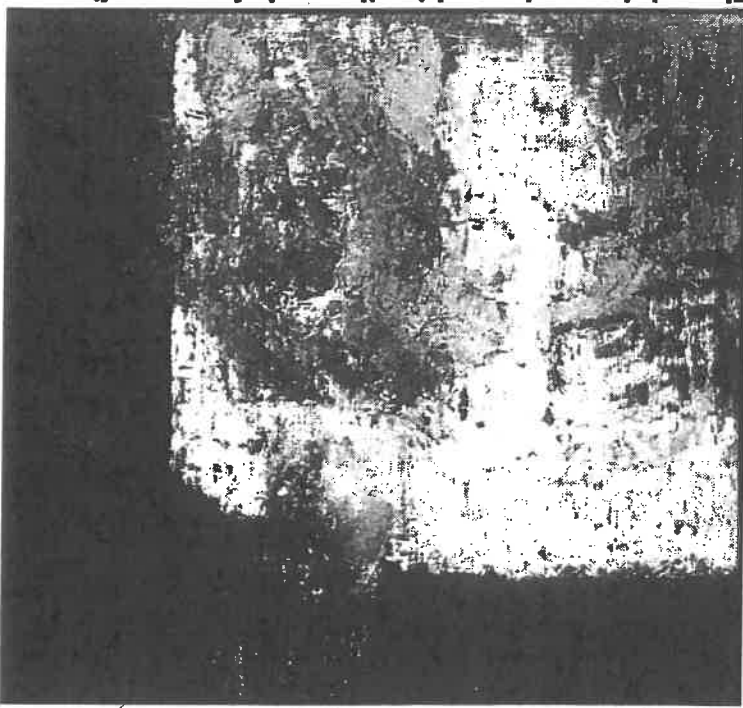
By DEIRDRE HANNA

Though he may not be a household name outside the art world, Toronto-based painter John Brown keeps cropping up when artists are asked who of their peers they most admire.

There's something about Brown's abstracted surfaces, the way his remarkably thin layers of paint read as if they have boundless depth, and the powerful colouristic impact Brown makes with a severely limited palette, that brings the term "virtuoso" to mind.

## Precise balance

His precisely balanced compositions bear comparison to such 20th-century greats as underrated Canadian master Jack Bush and Henri Matisse — it's hard to find fault with the placement of even one mark in a John Brown image. So what if his style of painterly abstraction is way out of fashion — those who love paint don't care. But, Brown maintains, paint is only a small part of what his work is about. "I'm really more concerned with the image than the paint," Brown



**Though he works on his oil panels for up to five years, John Brown applies remarkably thin paint.**

fairy-tale fame, while the subtly coloured graphite and gouache drawings on paper are titled Ring, after a Samuel Beckett short story. Brown also cites a third source — a three-volume set of stereoscopic anatomical drawings published in the 1910s by the University of Edinburgh, a set he was thrilled to acquire. "Even when the forms deviate from the body," Brown notes, "the colours don't."

And indeed the bloody reds and fleshy puce that add vital sparks of colour to Brown's paintings are rooted in the visceral. Not that Brown's forms deviate far from the body. Recognizably humanoid details emerge like ghosts from Brown's surfaces — a whole body, an eye socket, a throat and, in one case, a fairly detailed rendering of a rat-sized fossil. Brown found illustrated in a book by Stephen J. Gould.

Brown, who studied fine arts at the Ontario College of Art and University of Guelph, broke onto the scene in the mid-80s — by 1984 he was showing his work with late, legendary dealer Carmen Lamanna as well as in the Art Gallery of Ontario's landmark Toronto Painting touring show. But his career has slowed down through the 90s. "I don't make enough work to keep any for myself," Brown says with a shrug. "No matter how much paint I put on the panel, I can't arrive at the image any sooner. I've tried." Indeed, some of Brown's most interesting effects are the result of his parting down his pieces. "I'll wash stuff off when I'm not happy with a painting. I scrape and sand a lot of them." It's a process that takes time — Brown says many of his panels have been in the works for four or five years. "I have an ongoing dialogue with Olga about her wanting to drag work out of my studio, and me wanting to drag it back in. "My ideal would be to have five surfaces in my studio, and work on them for the rest of my life."

## Slow process