

Tortured portraits proof Brown is back on track

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Brown with his 'human heads' recording the shock of mortality that comes in middle age

EDWARD REGAN/The Globe and Mail

THE SHOW of paintings by John Brown now on view at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery marks a comeback of sorts for this Toronto artist, who is now 35. The exhibition, Brown's first in nearly four years, is not, however, a bold rush back to the barricades of early, uncritical neo-Expressionist painting; few artists would be so foolhardy as to rekindle that lost cause. Rather, this exhibit of 11 large oils on plywood — raw, unresolved depictions of human heads — is best read as a convalescent's first, awkward outing after a long illness of the spirit; the unsteady return to the world of a deeply conservative painter who was unfortunate enough to have come of creative age during the neo-Expressionist painting passion of the early 1980s.

That international revival of interest in painting, which dawned in the late 1970s and ended in the mid-1980s, briefly seemed to herald a return of genuinely conservative values and strategies in art-making, after the vivid season of formal experimentation that preceded it. But in retrospect — perhaps especially since last summer's shabby death in New York of the young junkie painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, who bought the arty hype of the hour hook, line and sinker — the era seems to have been treacherous. If a return to the high traditions of painting was briefly possible, the possibility was fore stalled for many painters, especially in New York, by drugs and showbiz, the siren call of big money, celebrity and notoriety.

Big money, it should be noted, was never a big issue in Toronto; but, as so often is the case, the general movement of art-scene matters in Toronto followed that of New York. Along with other thoughtful painters (and a great many graffiti artists, "bad" painters and other hype-hungry makers of flotsam and jetsam) in that busy moment, Brown was suddenly buoy-

ed up from obscurity into a glare of publicity, inflated expectations and controversy. For a while, he was able to bear that sudden exposure, and draw on the inner capital and discipline built up during his apprenticeship in the shadows, progressing from the dry, didactic religious tableaux of 1982 to the more richly allusive wrestlers and calamities of 1984.

But as the neo-Ex excitement ran its course, the inward vitality of Brown's work deteriorated under the hot lights, from the high point of that 1984 solo show at Carmen Lamanna to the fretful, frenetic work shown in early 1985, by which time the popular and critical interest in new painting, as well as John Brown himself, were both nearly exhausted.

For the 1985 exhibition — the artist's last (until now) — he painted the poignant and promising Fully Scaled Portrait, a two-panel depiction of wrestlers, a strong father, a crippled son. But this accomplished piece stood almost alone in the company of self-conscious, feeble images pastiched from Time magazine covers and other media sources — the artist's clumsy attempts to shake old-fashioned painterly expressiveness from his art and re-do his work to fit the sharply cooler, more primly academic and politically correct mood emerging (or re-emerging) on Queen Street, and everywhere else in the art world, at mid-decade.

It is hardly surprising that these ill-advised attempts at course correction failed. Brown was and is a committed artist of the afflicted, passionate male body, hence politically incorrect and probably unreconstructable.

His work has always openly recalled those artists who have also used the image of the wounded male body in general meditations on the malevolent cultural and spiritual forces threatening our humanity — the mystical religious wood-

carvers and print makers of fifteenth-century Germany, (Goya, the Expressionist Emil Nolde. A painter with such disreputable affinities and carnal interests in sex and death should never have expected to find a comfortable place in Toronto's more chastely Modernist, high-minded downtown scene in the late 1980s, the tone (if not agenda) of which has been set by critics and curators (Philip Monk and Bruce Grenville, artists Robin Collyer, Ian Carr-Harris and Liz Magor (in her recent work), dealers S. L. Simpson and Ydessa Hendeles.

By 1985, Brown had largely given up the loathing of flesh and the relentless dwelling on bleakness which he'd copied over from his mentor, the influential English oddity Francis Bacon; but he remained as vulnerable as the next artist to profound doubt about his own flesh and project. The changed climate in Toronto appears to have been enough to trigger that doubt, and keep this artist in his studio, mostly out of public sight, for more than three years.

During that period, especially late in it, Brown made the 11 oil paintings now on display at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery. These labored "human heads" (as the artist has titled them) are not as formally successful, as a group or singly, as Brown's best work of former days. But they do successfully declare Brown's renewed covenant with his art, and renewed commitment to his ancient craft.

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Tortured portraits (Continued)

At first glance, the paintings appear to be portraits, in various stages of disrepair or incompleteness; and, indeed, the general images and details of all but one (based on a photo of the artist's brother Joe) have been gathered from photos in an old Canadian Who's Who. Yet depiction is clearly the pretext, not the point, of these works; almost at once, our attention is drawn up from the imbedded image of the face to the agitated, wounded, scarred surface of the painting. In contradiction to the immortality of the portrait stands the mortality of the lacerated skin of paint, the sensuous, physical disarray of the unseen body beneath the visible head. In these pictures, that is, we are not given so many individuals being rescued from obscurity and death by the grace of portraiture; rather, Brown's white middle-aged men are being returned from individuality to general mortality, fleshly decline, the levelling end which awaits us all. (Among Brown's most cherished sources are old-fashioned surgical and pathology textbooks.)

There is nothing upbeat about these paintings, though their existence — proof that John Brown is on his creative legs again — is a very upbeat fact indeed. Where his legs will take him remains to be seen, though his choice of images in this show suggests where his art, and the art of other gifted painters who began their careers in the early 1980s, now stands.

All Brown's people are in their middle years — at that hard time in life, that is, when men first feel the end of youth, health, sex and the body itself stealing into their thoughts on something more than an occasional basis. With any luck, however, the initial shock of mortality in middle life — the trauma recorded in the depressed paintings in John Brown's current show — is succeeded by some sober decision-making about what's important in life, what's worth living for and doing, and how the common good can best be served with whatever gifts of art and intelligence you've been given. (Granted, Brown is a young man to be worried about such matters, but the AIDS epidemic and environmental destruction have pushed the threshold for dealing with sex and death earlier than it has been since the Middle Ages.)

The paintings in this show are stuck in the mire of grief that comes when mortality is first frankly acknowledged. But such grief is surely the first step toward a return to the public work painting is finally all about. We are given hope in this show that the new painting of this decade is not dead, but is merely middle-aged, with all the pain, trouble and radiant opportunity that comes with middle age. We can also hope — though here, our optimism must be cautious — that the promise of a solidly conservative, historically grounded painting of cultural crisis and the body, subverted in the early 1980s and later blocked by the rationalist theoreticians of art, may yet be fulfilled in Toronto during the 1990s.