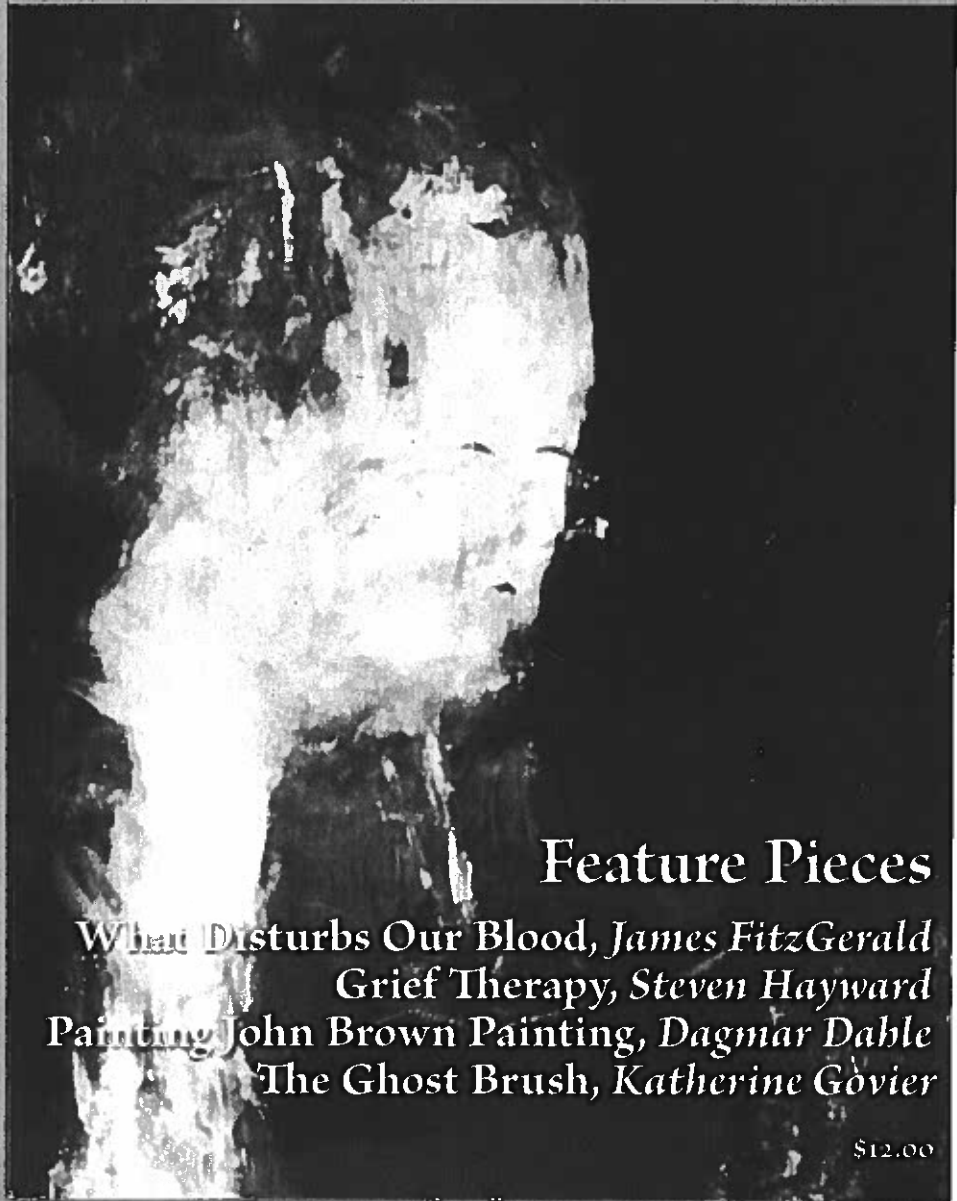


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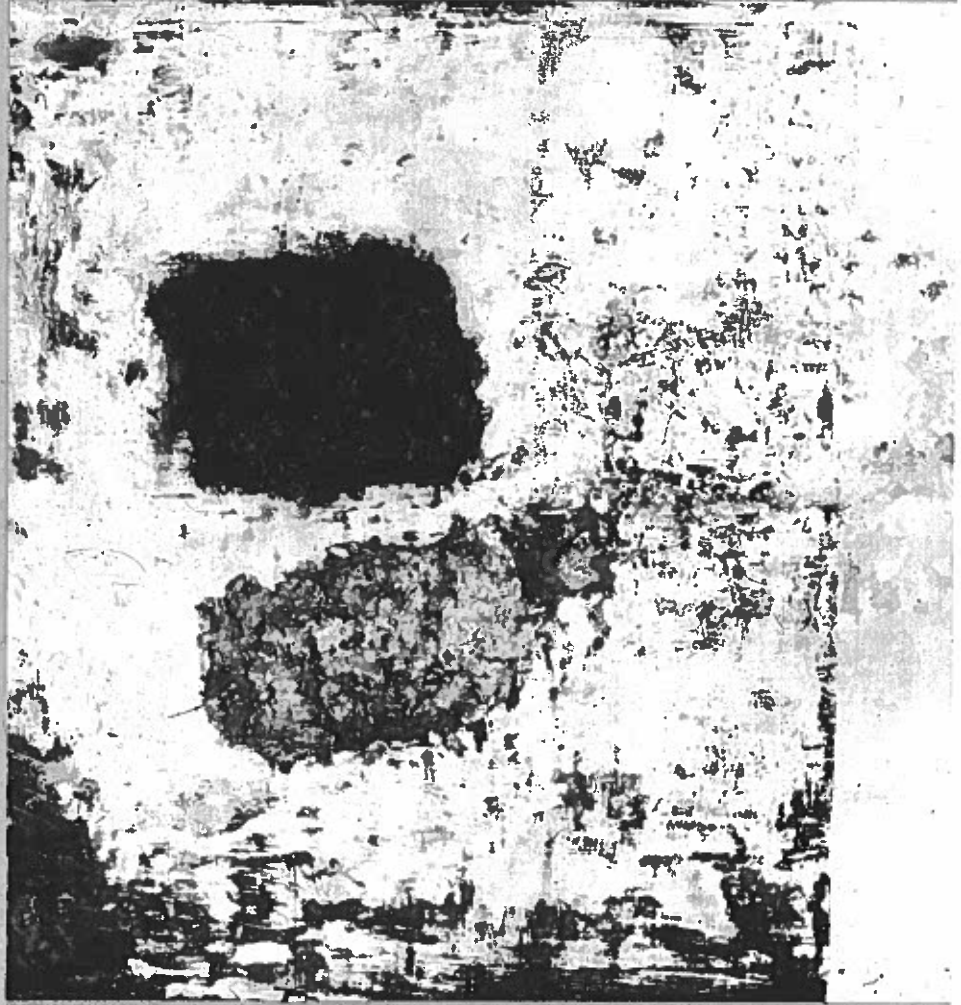
A JOURNAL OF MEDICINE, THE ARTS, AND HUMANITIES



Feature Pieces

What Disturbs Our Blood, James FitzGerald
Grief Therapy, Steven Hayward
Painting John Brown Painting, Dagmar Dable
The Ghost Brush, Katherine Govier

\$12.00



JOHN BROWN, FRONT COVER, *Human Head #19*, 1986–2003, oil/panel, 152 x 121 cm, private collection. BACK COVER: *Disease #2*, 1995–2003, oil/panel, 122 x 122 cm, private collection.

Painting John Brown Painting

By Anna Doble

John Brown is an artist. John Brown is a painter. John makes paintings. They start with something. Just something. Something to break nothing. He begins. Looking at the paintings John starts a painting. The start is a chance stumble. A scribble. A few marks. Something to talk to and something to talk about. What do you say when you begin a conversation? Say it now. What is the something that you and the paintings talk about. What is it?

Painter

The studio is the studio. John has set up for many years. I don't know how many. Maybe. It is the studio of a man who has been a painter for a long time. It is the practice of a man who has been a painter for a long time. Because the paintings make themselves with John there. John makes the paintings as the paintings make themselves. Paint goes on the surface and paint comes off the surface. It goes on and comes off it goes on and comes off and this happens for a long, long time. Something turns to nothing and then becomes something again. The word *appear* now comes to mind. Maybe an image appears. Maybe John sees a face on the paint in the painting in the paint. Maybe John lets the face stay or maybe he makes it go away. He will decide and sometimes he finds a point to decide. The dark battle between point and image. The battle between what the paint wants to be and what John wants it to be. John works in his studio and sometimes the phantoms and sometimes people



JOHN BROWN, *Autopsy 6*, 1998–1996, oil/panel, 63.5 x 64.5 cm, private collection.

drop by to chat. Between interruptions John works. Sometimes John makes his own interruptions because John likes interruptions. John works between interruptions, keeping the paintings always in his peripheral vision. John works and works and then he goes home and makes supper for Herb. John has known Herb for a long time and every morning John gets up and goes to the studio and paints and every day he goes home and makes supper for Herb. All this time the paintings change every day and become other paintings. They are paintings that change every day, and at some point they stop.

When I see John Brown he talks a lot. He says a lot about what he is thinking about and reading about and he says it in a string of words and they are pretty continuous. John talks a lot but the work of John

Brown eludes language. The work of John Brown is the work that we do when we work as we do what we do. You can't really talk about that work of John Brown. What is there to say? John Brown starts a painting and the painting makes itself and gets made by him and through him and there are many things that have to happen in order for the painting to be made. And then there are many things we have to do to make John Brown's paintings. To make paintings for John and through John and to John. To love and like John's paintings. To hope for sublime things and unreal things and real things. There are things that are not things but are assuming thingsness. Thing and no thing. The paint, especially those tiny repetitive marks, gives shape and space to a painting that is not yet a painting, that is thing and not thing and has thingness. John Brown's paintings are a sequence of notes. Not being a thing too much. Being a thing a little. Removal as a strategy for becoming. John and Herb spend a lot of time in museums in Europe looking at paintings. Sometimes when John talks he says Velázquez, Duccio, Goya or Romanesque, Byzantine or ex-votive paintings. John also says Grimm's fairy tales, Samuel Beckett, Frankenstein, and maybe Gertrude Stein. John Brown reads a lot and looks at many films and many museums and listens to a lot of music. John looks at pictures and hangs pictures on the walls of his studio. Sometimes they are pictures of bodies, medical diagnostic texts, plane crashes, anatomy drawings, or Kim, the leader of North Korea. John talks about human genomes and Frankenstein and John says it's the reanimation of life and how science and anatomy help us imagine ourselves in the world and define what we are in the world. John looks at the inside of the body. The inside of the body pictured through technologies and the utopian dream of regeneration, these utopian dreams, these modernist utopian dreams that John is suspicious of. The miraculous body, the body that has been interceded for and the body of science, the myth of religion, the myth of science. All these ways of approaching the body, the body of knowing and not knowing the body. In the autopsy paintings you go inside the body, the magnified body, the secret body, the body inside you. And sometimes the paintings are cut, just cut off. Sometimes, a painting is finished with a power sander. This removal, this searching, unearthing where you have been, what you have done, searching the strata of your own history,

John searching the strata of his own history, his body's history, created through some sort of story that he told himself, of all the stories that we tell ourselves.

Painting

John begins by scribbling on the surface and sometimes John begins with a picture. John must begin with something because he must have something to take away. And when he begins with a picture it is a picture that has fascinated John for a long time. So he begins with a picture. As soon as John begins he begins to take the picture away. Scraping off paint, putting on paint. Affirm, deny. Tiny marks on an epic surface. Then John forgets the picture and releases the picture and John just paints and scrapes and paints and scrapes and paints and scrapes. Then John scrapes and paints every inch over and over, scraping and unscraping, painting and unpainting navigating downward. Stratigraphy. Digging down, unearthing, resurfacing, John finds the image again. John finds the image. The image finds John. The image is the structure and the image is just the image but now the image is John's and has come from John's body. John has felt the image by not feeling it and John has looked at the image by not looking at it and then the image is John and John is the image. And then the image is me and the painting is my body. And the medical text, the diseased body, the miraculous body, the falling tower, the burning airplane is John's body and is in his body and the picture is me and in my body. And John wonders the inside of his body and I wonder mine and then the painting is the queer body the not queer body, the male body the not male body, the visceral blood spill, pain body the puke body and the body/body body. The fragile body, the penetrating and penetrated body, the vulnerable body, the miraculous body that heals itself and continues. The imperfect body. John's partner lost his eye and John's brother lost his leg and John painted. John painted paintings for his brother and his partner, like those ex-votive paintings, but John is not a believer. John is suspicious of religion. Religion, perfection, utopia, and modernism are all things John is suspicious of. John does not believe in authenticity but he believes in believable artifice. John has pictures in his studio. John has pictures of bodies and cars and towers and diseased skin. Sometimes the pictures are newspaper photographs and sometimes they are pictures of paintings. Some of the pictures of paintings are paintings

John saw in museums in Europe. Sometimes they are very important pictures, sometimes they are unimportant pictures.

When John finishes the painting John knows the painting is finished because it has left the studio. John begins again with a picture and then paints with his back to the picture. When he paints as he paints his body is touching painting. John is distracted while he paints, John is restless and doubtful with exquisite torture. John begins again each day and each day he goes home to make dinner. John Brown is a painter and he has been a painter for a very long time. Then the paintings will hang in Olga Korper Gallery and people will come and see John's paintings and people will drink wine and talk and see paintings and maybe take paintings home.

Paintings

Later and before, I see paintings at Korper's. I see a painting and I see the inside of my body and I remember my body at Korper's. I remember the miraculous vulnerable body, the pain body, the joy body. I know and unknow my body at Korper's. When the body encounters the body of the painting, what is the name for that something that stops us in our tracks? In that stillness you encounter your own body. As though you could perform your own autopsy. If I tell you what happens as I tell you words slip away. Could I say tiny inner vibration, small tremor, gut churning, tremble? Geographies of spleen or cartilage or bone? Veins bile mucus liquid hair brain retina glands marrow fat fingers finger tips? Clumsily I attempt visceral. Clumsily I try to say what I see when I see as I look. But looking I have nothing to say. Looking at the paintings I think no words, though vaguely I know I'm alive. Like Peter Falk in *Wings of Desire* saying to his invisible angels, I can't see you but I know you're there, I can not grasp it. There might be a story and the story might be a story of a lost eye or a lost leg or the story might be a story of love and fear and disease. I don't know. I don't know what stories the painting might tell if the painting told stories because the painting refuses. And yet I know the story is there or has been there and may be there again. The story knows no story. The story is performing its own autopsy, removing layer by layer the skin the flesh the veins the form. It is described for you and known by you and you are feeling so vague so precise. And broadly as you attend to the heart of the matter it is best if you don't look directly.

You remove the spleen the heart the lungs the aorta and carefully each tiny capillary each minute nerve, as you travel through the layers, as you look at the paintings. We are in the gallery and I encounter the paintings and I look at the paintings, still and not still, mute and not mute, performing some sort of alchemy, some sort of order of surprise. They make me feel.

Dygonar Puhle is a visual artist and a professor in the Department of Art at the University of Edinburgh in Alberta.