

A WHILE BACK, Toronto painter John Brown was given a curious mail-order catalogue published some time long before the Second World War. Chances are you would never have heard about it, had not Brown decided to use images from it in his

ON SHOW

latest artwork, which goes on view tomorrow at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto.

Rather than the usual mail-order fare of stovepipes and sweaters, this ragged old booklet offered a range of fancy-dress costumes and Masonic paraphernalia, and an astonishing line of what might be called hazing equipment, to be used for humiliating initiates. A bucking goat (called "The Royal Bumper"), for example, and a thing called a "Lifting and Spanking Machine."

There's nothing pornographic or sado-masochistic about the catalogue, by the way, though it is all silly. The manufacturers advertise the use of their products as clean, rollicking fun. And it seems possible that the brotherly members of yesteryear's lodges who bought this stuff got many a good laugh out of such items as "The Combination Scale and Traitor's Judgement Stand," and still carried on lives as useful citizens and good parents.

In fact, it's that hearty camaraderie and male humor that commended the imagery to Brown, who has long been interested in maleness and how male identity is constructed, and here gives those interests fascinating treatment. But I'm making this show sound like a sociology class. It's anything but.

Each of the 10 works here features two large drawings, encased together in a sturdy box frame of wood. On one side is a device or ritual badge selected from the catalogue, rendered handsomely with a firm descriptive pencil.

On the other side, typically, is a drawing of a naked man based on the plain, frontal photographs found in medical books. And I do mean naked. The word 'nude' suggests erotic allure, and there is surely none of that in these images of variously fat and sagging, weak and potbellied and otherwise ordinary men.

These pictures of naked males



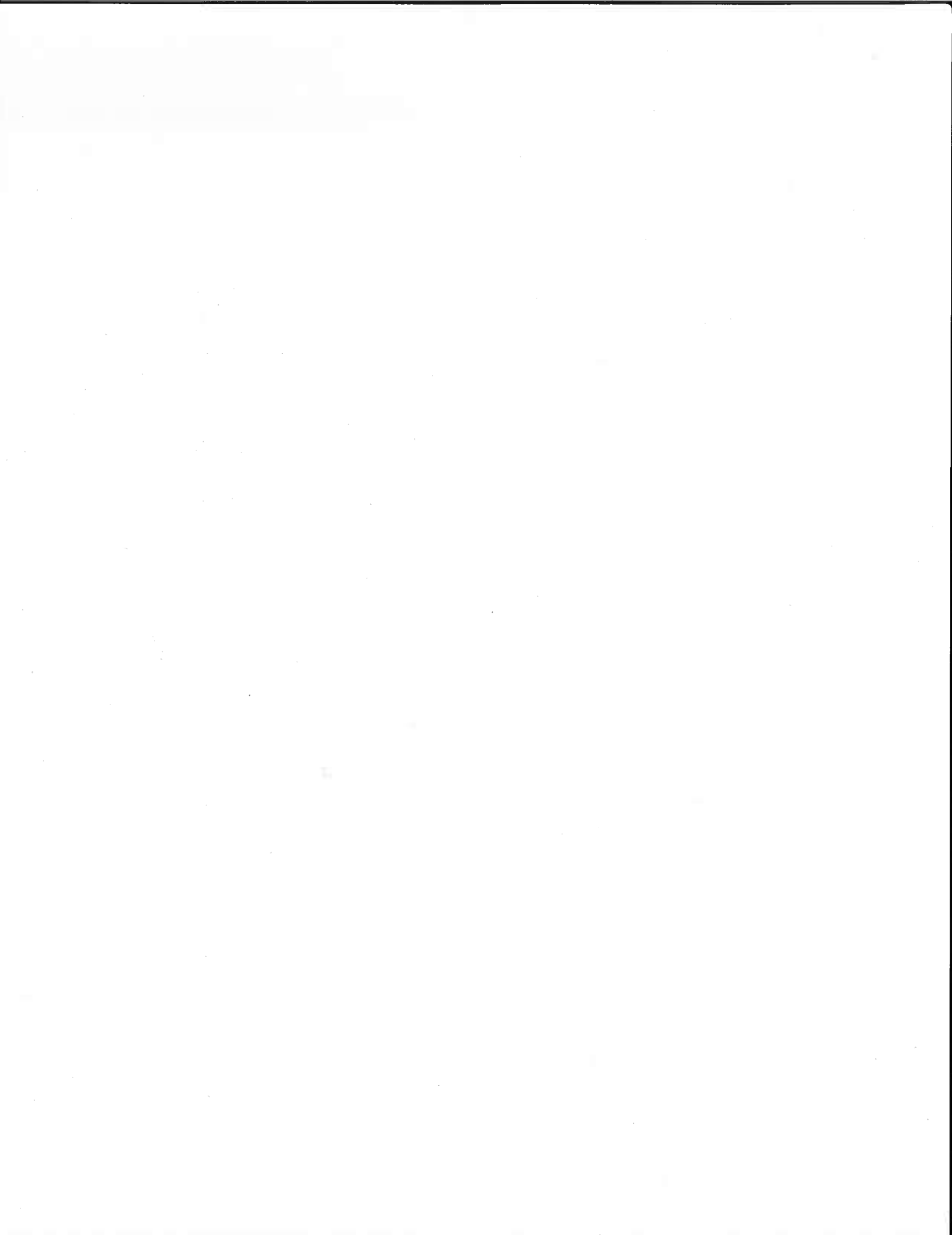
John Brown and a detail of one of his works: fascinating treatment.

are the most beautiful and accomplished drawings Brown has ever shown. If the renderings of the humiliation machines are careful and judicious, the mixed-media drawings of men alongside are strongly expressive, anxious in their abrupt thrusts and sudden frailty, restrained yet entirely arresting. In these drawings, Brown creates a remarkable counter-statement to official maleness, simply by representing non-ideal male bodies with such conviction, and such utter candor about his own carnal anxieties.

While these pictures of men are entirely serious, the add-up of both pictures together is meant to be, and is, funny. The humor in John Brown's art is surely not that of rambunctious fraternity high jinks. It's more akin to smiling at the common follies of men, our tendencies to loftily impractical idealism and low pranks, for example, as well as to bully-boyishness involved in hazing.

A female friend once told me that men should be forbidden by law

from congregating in groups of more than three, simply because of the foolery males get up to. John Brown, a straight male very much concerned with what males get up to when they get together, would probably agree with her.



BROWN, John

b. 1953

Born in Sarnia, Ontario, he emerged in the 1980's as an important painter noted by John Bentley Mays at the Olga Korper Gallery, Tor., as follows, "The trouble for John Brown and for an increasing number of thoughtful people, is that . . . handy modern analogies from technology lead almost inevitably to the insidious view of the human body as a kind of appliance. . . . Few seem to care that the metaphor crumples flat at a hard glance. A pump, for instance, doesn't slow down when it hears lovely music, or thump madly when a second, sexually exciting pump lurches into view. . . . Because John Brown is a painter — one of the most solidly gifted, reflective painters to emerge in Toronto during the 1980's — his counter-statement to the deceitful mechanical thinking about the body is cast in the stuff of art, and draws its involving strength from the old materials and practices of vigorous abstract art-making. The five large oils on wood and five beautiful small mixed-media works on veneer, . . . have these or similar titles: *J.W.B.'s Leg*, *H.S.'s Eye*, *S.C.'s Heart*. These peculiar labels send two signals, first, that the identity of the owner of the particular leg, eye, heart or whatever is Brown's business, not our's, and probably doesn't matter anyway. The second message is that what we are seeing in these abstracts are painterly metaphors, antimechanical and sensuously intimate, of human body parts — or, to be more exact, attempts to provide a carnal vocabulary more ambiguous, poetic and holistic than the old lingo of pumps, kitchen utensils, exhaust pipes and so forth. . . . each painting in this show exists as a field of incidents, excitations, rests, injuries. A patch of twilight grey, overpainted with a sullen red and scraped down to the board, the hard bone under the flesh of oil painting; a cloud of fuming, toxic green, a slashing wound bleeding oxblood, abrasions and scrapes that appear to have come with the passage of many years; strong, serene moments evoked by dry, ethereal Renaissance blues — these are some of the elements and tactics, deployed in the largest paintings here with high virtuosity, which Brown uses to declare his understanding of embodied life." Brown resides in Toronto and is represented in the CCAB in Ottawa and many other collections.

References

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Globe & Mail, Tor., Dec. 2, 1995 "Art Review — A carnal vocabulary for the human body" by

John Bentley Mays