



John Brown





John Brown

ANSWERS

a fiction by John Mays

The painting of John Brown stinks of the body – the dark quiddity of it, the flinch of flesh enduring the duress of living, the heaviness and hunger that bind us to the world.

Instead of depicting this or that visible body, as his heroes in art from late medieval religious painters to Goya and Bacon have done, Brown portrays everybody's body as each person experiences it. It is the weight the mind hauls. It is the soft, wordless contraption that occasionally blooms in ecstasy or suffering, but that more usually metabolizes, secretes, excretes silently, persisting until old age or disease slows it and death stops it.

Because the body in Brown's painting is anybody's body, the artist's as well as the critic's, the distance that ordinary art criticism assumes is compromised, eroded. The long conversations between artist and critic about the work become sites of ambiguous exchange about the body; boundaries dissolve; the words of one party to the dialogue become the words of the other. Identities become unmoored: John Brown is no longer exactly the John Brown of history, John Mays is no longer exactly himself, under the gaze of the paintings of the body that surround him.

So, instead of trying to explicate or paraphrase it, let us try to imagine this situation. It is an interview in the artist's studio, in a derelict warehouse at the edge of the city's dying industrial district.

Around the bright room hang paintings on large wooden panels, some incomplete, others finished. Journalistic photographs, clipped from popular magazines and newspapers, or photocopied from books, are pinned to the walls.

The interviewer sits on a dilapidated couch, the artist, opposite, on an office chair.

Outside the large windows, light rain falls from a dark sky.

The artist, whom we will call John Brown, answers.

I am reading about the war. A history of the car bomb, a history of the Holocaust, a book about Mussolini's Italy, and a book about the Second World War. The war, all-pervasive, cold, penetrating even our secret selves, is the terrible river we stand in, the corrosive liquid in which we exist, that which determines what we are becoming.

I read about the war because of the times we are living through. Doesn't it have the feel of a transitional uncertain time, riven by crises of all kinds, something like the nineteen-thirties? The volatile mixture of politics, economics and religion is frightening. Under these conditions, war binds the world together in common churn and turmoil. I think this war springs from something basic: the ambition of people to impose rational will on the world, to bend and twist its structures until it conforms to their abstract, and usually deadly, ideas of perfection.

I do not believe in God, any god, or an after-life. I believe that I will die, and that, when I am dead, the war will continue without me, as it has gone on before I existed and during the time I was in the world. There is no progress. That is my position: things are merely better in certain places in certain times. Nor do I believe in some secular redemption. I don't trust the Left. It is completely moribund, devoid of ideas. The right is horrific and threatening. The world cannot be a better place, it can be nothing other than what it is, and that is the war. There is no fairness in the agenda.

Art is not redemptive in any sense. The idea that art can change society, or change the human heart, is an error that is still alive, *mutatis mutandi*, in the contemporary world. Art is merely one thing to do, one thing among all the things we can do, that does not oppress. I am heartened by the thought that Caravaggio oppressed no-one. Of course, I am always concerned about slipping from cynicism into nihilism. Art is an investment in the human future, in the idea that there will be one. I make no claim to consistency on this or any other point.

Painting is one of the last honest things left to do. My goal is to make pictures that are incoherent by conventional standards, but that hold together according to their own logic, their inner urgency. This urgency has nothing to do with any pictorial topic or subject. It is true that I was seduced into art-making by pictures, by the enchantments of the pictorial. I fell in love with painting through looking at inexpensive reproductions. But I understood

nothing at all until I had seen the real things. It was how Velásquez painted that mattered, how the Spanish and Italian artists before the Renaissance painted, that made it possible for me to become a painter. My decision had nothing to do with their subject matter.



FEBRUARY 4 2033, 2008 – 2009
oil on panel, 213 x 183 cm

deciphering, scraping away the surface detritus and commotion in an effort to open space – an interrogation in a language that has been translated badly.

My painting is subtractive, scraping and scratching away the flesh of paint, down to the wooden bones of the support. It is true that I usually employ mass-produced, vernacular photographs to get started on a painting. But as much as I admire the work by certain photographers of the mid-twentieth century – Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand, Diane Arbus, a few others – my art, which is anti-compositional, owes nothing to the practice of photography.

Anyone fascinated by marks, as I am, will probably be uninterested in the surface, the sensuous poverty, of the photograph. Painting has powers of rejuvenation that a photograph doesn't have, because photos always refer to a specific time, the time of their creation. Paintings age in a way different from that of photographs. The marks that constitute painting either deepen in their metaphoric content, or, in the case of bad painting, they reveal their cheapness. But not all marks interest me. I am revolted, for example, by the canvases of Rubens, whose dubious mastery lies in his ability to do special effects.

Every war is a civil war, and intestine conflict. If my paintings are war-like, if they are fields of disorder, this disorder is in the gut of society and of the self in society, in the war that determines the contours, the inner shape and entelechy, of everyone.

I do not teach. I engage in no activism, in either art or life. The work conveys a plurality of meanings, none really stable, all more or less unreliable. But it is an art against utopia, which has produced all kinds of horrors; an art that celebrates life, anti-teleological and skeptical.

It was Malraux who taught us the distinction between Paul Cézanne and Monsieur Cézanne, how it was the Monsieur Cézanne disappeared when this man went into the studio. There is something inexplicable about this vanishing, something uncanny. The romantic view of what the artist does is an attempt to explain this mystery. So be it. I don't think much about such things. But I don't like the idea of debunking all the myths, laying bare the process. Laying bare the machinations of politics is important. Laying bare the origins of the work of art is not important, and is a fruitless, idle pursuit.

Art is made out of everything around you, everything you see, read, experience and undergo. It is harmful to the artist, and to the inquirer, to limit what comes into art. Because I believe

this, I have little interest in the exclusionary art of the nineteen-seventies – bourgeois colour-field abstraction, avant-gardist Minimalism – that surrounded my own beginnings as a painter. My dialogue is with the painting of the past. I don't know what art is. Perhaps that is why I make it. My job is not to figure out what art is.

Each of my paintings begins with a mass-produced photograph, tacked up on the studio wall. Doing so began as an experiment, a way to make paintings faster. Early on, it was an image of the body in crisis, such as some art-historical picture of the crucified Christ, or a head of some unknown or obscure man, any object of the forgetting that is history. The typical spring-board, more recently, has been some mechanical object – a car destroyed by bombing, wrenched into a fanatic wreck by violence; an airplane, perhaps, or some other form that interests me. That's how the painting begins. It always ends up as something else. I am always under this ridiculous impression that the picture is going to look like something, become a documentary, and it never does. My work is misinterpretation, mis-statement, a conversion of found imagery, into something utterly new. The changes and transformations – how the picture drifts, twists and leaps – are what interest me about painting.

The results are indeterminate. Not because I am an obscurantist, or because I'm trying to make things difficult for the viewer! That's simply what painting is about: a leaking of meanings, rather than a bold statement of them; something seen out of the corner of the eye, not quite understandable. What emerges from the work of painting is always an object, of course, but it is an object in the process of becoming and unbecoming. I think of those fantastic news-service photographs of the German airship Hindenburg over New Jersey, floating effortlessly as it explodes against the night sky. This indeterminacy in my painting allows the viewer room to enter into the work as he would enter any situation in ordinary life, with its complicated meanings, its

continual shift and slide of comprehension. Goya comes to mind: nobody has ever figured out his black paintings at the Prado. They are memorable and inexplicable, memorable because they are inexplicable.

I have no interest in the abstract painting of Ad Reinhardt or Barnett Newman, or any other painters concerned primarily with the edge, the grid, the material facture and organization of the picture. I believe the painting that matters will always be a figuring-forth of reality, and I have believed that from my early pictures of the Crucifixion onwards. Artists such as Luc Tuymans and the late Guston mean something to me, because their work seeks to capture the fragment of awareness, consciousness, what happens in a moment, then passes away. I mistrust order.

My pictures are obviously made of matter – wood and paint, the material stuff of the world. But they are not denials or transcendences of matter. They are rather its fulfillment, an allowing of matter to become what it most essentially is, through a procedure of becoming that is mysterious to me.

History is a language, and art is a language. I occasionally begin a painting by laying down a text in an imaginary alphabet. Like my use of photographs, it's a tactic to get starting on a picture. But it also goes to something I believe, and that poets believe: that the language we receive from culture will only be free when its Eros is allowed to break out. We know the tongue is an erotic organ of great subtlety. Language is fulfilled, and so is painting, when it becomes incandescent with the tongue's erotic energy.

The light in my paintings comes from the back, instead of coming from the outside. My removal of paint is undertaken to allow more light to enter from the rear. I don't especially like to paint. I do so because I want to see that light, because I want to see what results from the scraping and subtraction.



In preparing for my first public show, at the Carman Lamanna Gallery in 1982, I wrote a note to myself to make black boxes in a landscape. This idea came obliquely from a book that talked about buildings as a kind of weapon, a fortification necessitated by security concerns. While explicit architectural references, like pictorial references of every kind, have largely disappeared from my work, I am still place-making, making an art that creates place and space. My practice involves painting on wood, an architectural substance. Hence it is a kind of construction that, like any construction, includes frailty, the conditions of its own decline and fall. This early interest in space led me naturally to Goya, Velásquez, Guston, and others who portray harrowing places of the spirit.

My most important debt to abstract painting is its abolition of the single-point perspective that had dominated Western art since the Renaissance. My paintings have perspective, because they open space, but it is a matter of infinite numbers of vanishing points, which is another way to say that such points do not exist at all in what I do. Like the Japanese prints that nourished the spatial thinking of Gauguin, the interiors of my paintings exist in vertical perspective, and describe the rising and falling, the upsurge and collapse, of the world's spiritual and physical landscape under the conditions of civil war.

I can know only my own body, which speaks to me in desire, hunger and suffering. I know all other bodies in the world through representations: carvings of Christ on the Cross, anatomy textbooks, photographs of people. My paintings are still more representations of the body, my body, which you cannot know otherwise.

The body is historical. The body of modern humanity, including my body, has been marked by the disasters we have lived through. When I began to paint, I wanted to present the desolated body of humanity in the most vigorous way I knew. That is

why I painted Crucifixions. But they were never simple art-historical pastiches. In a triptych in that 1982 show at Carmen Lamanna, I put on either side of the Cross, hairless and cadaver-like nude men in chairs, being subjected to Christ's agonies. They were us, presumably on the outside of the horrific execution itself, but deeply implicated in the events unfolding. Between 1988 and



GRIMM #75, 2009
oil on panel, 61 x 61 cm
Private Collection, Belgium

1993, when I did paintings that started with heads, the work went from the outside to the inside of the body, from a portrayal of the sufferings of others to the representation of inner stares of organic passion and stirring, sensation, distress.

Sex and painting are intimately connected, because both are about touch and desire. Painting is

more erotic than other forms of making art, because the material stuff of it is sensuous. It is this eroticism, not beauty, that makes painting a dangerous subversion of serious thought.

The desiring body is in every one of my paintings. It is my own body – male, gay, a body that never menstruated. Yet it is hidden, not because I am shy or diffident, but because I know this body only in its continual hiding and disclosing, appearing and withdrawing. In applying paint to wooden surfaces, then scraping and gouging it away, then applying more paint, then removing it – in that process of construction, the desiring body makes itself known and unknown. This body is the one moved by sexual desire, that is chaotic, Dionysiac, libidinal – constantly tearing at the

social skin of the Apollonian bodies we show the world. Like sex, making art is about letting go, about moving with the longings of the flesh. That we can rarely let go, in sex or in art, is why the body masks itself, and why my art is a kind of masking.

Painting aims to perform the impossible task of removing the mask from the hidden body of desire. I have always been attracted by removing the authoritative brushstroke, the most male thing in painting – scraping it away, removing the mask of cultural acceptability from the wild, perverse body that, like every other late Romantic, I believe dwells within. (I read Baudelaire and Rimbaud and Rilke.) It was only after I had been painting for some time that I realized the vandalism and defacing I do in my art is itself a kind of non-revealing, or secrecy.

The pictorial space which the viewer enters is necessarily political space, a kind of social architecture, or museum: chthonic, subjective, anti-rational and, because anti-rational, anti-classicist.

At one level, my paintings militate against self-knowledge, at least in its Enlightenment version as a project of absolute intellectual penetration, abolition of the perverse motions and configurations of the body.

Painting is a way to glimpse the changes in things, as they grow up, decay, disappear. It is a way to be alive, to practice active resistance to the notion that there is order and intelligence in the universe. A way to recognize – a way to keep reminding myself, to insist – that there are things other than culture operating in the formation of the self. My colours are often faded, which enables the paintings to be seen in continuity with nature, which also fades and dies and ceases to be. Biology, sexuality and painting bear witness to the decline at the heart of existence.

When I was a younger man, I was obsessed with the body and death. Hence, my interest in Francis Bacon and other painters of

his sort. Now, I think I have said everything about the body that I need to say, and the focus of my work is much more formal. Or perhaps I am just more calm, living, as I do, in the body of a man over fifty, free, at least a little, of some passions of my younger years. I don't know. But there is one thing I do know: that my hidden body, older now, is still in the work, disclosing and closing, opening and shutting in the marks I make.

STUPID #1, 2011

oil on panel, 300 x 245 cm



PORTRAIT OF M.A., 2011
oil on panel, 152 x 167 cm



TATLARIN, 2011

oil on panel, 183 x 213 cm







detail of INCUBATOR 2010 – 11

INCUBATOR, 2010 – 11
oil on panel, 183 x 213 cm





GRIMM 79, 2010
oil on panel, 40,5 x 40,5 cm



GRIMM 80 & GRIMM 78, 2010
each oil on panel, 40,5 x 40,5 cm



GRIMM 83 & GRIMM 82, 2010
each oil on panel, 40,5 x 40,5 cm



GRIMM 84 & GRIMM 91, 2010
each oil on panel, 40,5 x 40,5 cm



GRIMM 87 & GRIMM 86, 2010
each oil on panel, 40,5 x 40,5 cm



GRIMM 81, 2010
oil on panel, 40,5 x 40,5 cm



GRIMM 67, 2009
oil on panel, 61 x 61 cm



GRIMM 69, 2009
oil on panel, 61 x 61 cm

MAY 26 2021, 2009

oil on panel, 213 x 183 cm



JOHN BROWN



Born in Sarnia, Canada
Lives and works in Toronto, Canada

EDUCATION

- 1987 MFA College of Architecture, Art and Planning,
Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
1985 BFA Queen's University at Kingston, Kingston, Ontario

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 WILDE Gallery, Berlin, Germany
2010 Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
2009 Book Launch, Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
2008 Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
2008 Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA), Toronto, ON
2006 Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
2005 Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
2003 Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
2001 Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
2000 Galerie Eric Devlin, Montreal, QC

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Inventory #1*, Wilde Gallery, Berlin, Germany
2008 *Mnemonic Devices*, Gairloch Gardens Oakville Galleries,
Oakville, ON

- 2003 Galerie Im Kornhauskeller, Pro Arte Ulmer,
Kunststiftung Ulm, Germany
2003 *Painters 15*, MOCCA, North York, ON
2003 *Works on Paper*, Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
2002 *Painters 15: Canadian Painting Exhibition*, Shanghai, China
1999 Galeries René Blouin, Montréal, QC
1996 *Traces*, Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto, ON
1991 *Working on the Fringe*, Redeemer College, Ancaster, ON
1989 *University of Guelph Alumni Art Exhibition*, Macdonald Stewart
Art Centre, Guelph, ON
1988 *The Body and Society*, The Embassy Cultural House,
London, ON
1988 *Figurative Force*, The Gallery, Stratford, ON
1988 *Northern Artists*, The Office of the Premier, Toronto, ON
1987 *Written Images*, Touring Exhibition: Art Gallery of Ontario,
Toronto; Glendon Gallery, Toronto; Laurentian Museum Art
Centre, Sudbury; Oakville Galleries, Oakville, ON

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- Art Gallery of Ontario, ON
Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa, ON
Claridge Collection, Montreal, QC
The Donovan Collection, St. Michael's College, Toronto, ON
Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON
Royal Bank of Canada, Toronto ON
TD Canada Trust, Toronto, ON
The Bank of Montreal, Toronto ON
The National Club
UBS, Toronto, ON

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- 2008 Bently Mays, John, Liss, David, Lee, Dennis, John Brown
(Toronto: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art)
1988 Grosman, Penny-Lynn, *Figurative Force*
(Stratford: The Gallery/Stratford)
1985 Gascon, France, *Écrans politiques*
(Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal)



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PHOTOS
Marcus Schneider, et al.

COVER
Detail of TATLARIN, 2011
oil on panel
183 x 213 cm

WILDE GALLERY