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Thin Skin

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

This thesis contains two distinct chapters as well as a section of photographs of my paintings. The first chapter is a comprehensive artist statement that outlines my approach to image making using Heewon Chang’s autoethnographic method. This approach emphasizes cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher’s behaviours, thoughts, and experiences in relation to others in society. Chapter two is a case study on the artist, John Brown. In addition to being a significant influence on my practice, Brown and I are both deeply concerned with representations of the body in contemporary painting as well as the formal capabilities of paint. The section of paintings provides an overview of my exploration and development of work over the two-year period of the MFA. The goal of this thesis is not to provide an answer to a question, but to foster contemplation on how painting could generate reflection of our shared human condition.

Keywords

Contemporary Art, Painting, Figuration, Queer, Masculinity, Identity, Relationships, Human Condition, Intuition, Agency, Autoethnography, Fort McMurray, Heewon Chang, John Brown
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Introduction

This integrated article thesis contains two distinct chapters as well as a section of paintings that together, along with the exhibition, *THIN SKIN* at McIntosh Gallery from August 5th to September 10th 2016, make up a dossier that fulfills part of the requirements for a Master of Fine Arts degree at Western University. The three parts of this thesis and the focus of my MFA in general, culminate to ultimately form the basis of my research interest, which does not seek to provide an answer to a question, but rather to foster contemplation on how painting could generate reflection of our shared human condition. Through painting, autoethnography, and researching contemporary and historical artists, I believe my goal is achievable by investing in my approaches, which are further outlined below.

The first chapter is a comprehensive artist statement that outlines my approach to image making using Heewon Chang’s autoethnographic method. This approach emphasizes cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher’s behaviours, thoughts, and experiences in relation to others in society. I use Chang’s method to help evaluate the extent and affect to which growing up gay in the hyper-masculine, catholic, and conservative setting of Fort McMurray, Alberta, has had on my mental and physical wellbeing. To attempt this, I included an analysis of my history and recorded a personal account of my formation from adolescence to young adulthood endeavoring to identify significant events or memories, as well as if there are lasting mental and physical consequences that remain and manifest in my daily life. Additionally in this chapter, I
present how I see my biography and human agency coalescing to create content in my work, while simultaneously also attempting to situate my work and practice within the history of masculine, figurative painting, which elaborates on the space in which, I believe, my work occupies.

Chapter two is a case study on the artist and practice of John Brown. In addition to being a significant influence on my practice, Brown is also gay and grew up in a small, conservative mining town. More importantly, Brown and I are both deeply concerned with representations of the body in contemporary painting as well as the formal capabilities of paint. In the case study I analyze some of Brown’s work as well as his public and private biography, striving to delve into how and why he is trying to come to terms with aspects of existence, and exactly what lived experiences he uses as inspiration for his work. Through research and from speaking with Brown, one specific element that I investigate closely is how I found the colour, or rather shade, black to be reoccurring in Brown’s work for some time. In addition to the physical and psychological affects of colour, as well as the biographical information that informs his work, including being gay and growing up in a conservative mining town, I would also like to situate Brown’s work and ideas within an art historical framework. To this end, I focus on connections I have found with William Turner in the case study.

The section of paintings provides an overview of my exploration and development of work over the two-year period of the MFA at Western. I have included work from each of the six semesters of the program as I believe this best expresses my advancement and dedication to the program and medium of painting in the most direct manner. Because of this, some of the paintings contain a strong formal or narrative
connection, while others appear to depart abruptly. The limitation of having to choose twenty paintings that best, or most accurately, represents my two years in the program required the exclusion of many works that may serve as the connecting tissue between the included works. The works I have chosen to include are what I believe to be significant works that best outline my development and successes in the program, as well as key areas of advancement that have come about from committed exploration and investment in myself and medium of choice.
Artist Statement

I will navigate this artist statement by pursuing an autoethnographic approach that entwines my biography and formation of identity with how and why I make paintings. Autoethnography is a methodology that Heewon Chang\(^1\) states, “emphasizes the autobiographic materials of the researcher as the primary data. Differing from other self-narrative writings such as autobiography and memoir, autoethnography emphasizes cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher’s behaviours, thoughts, and experiences in relation to others in society.”\(^2\) Using Chang’s methodology I will attempt to describe my approach to image making, and also evaluate the extent and affect to which growing up gay in the hyper-masculine, catholic, and conservative setting of Fort McMurray, Alberta, has had on my mental and physical wellbeing. Additionally, situating my artistic practice within the history of masculine, figurative painting will elaborate the space in which my work occupies. However, interjecting my queer narrative into the environment and history that I have been raised will situate my artwork in two worlds, i.e. within the canon of male, figurative painters and a queer history of painting, which is where I believe the strength and interest of my work lies.

I will unpack how I have experienced growing up in Fort McMurray, and how this affects, and continues to affect the decisions I make in my daily activities and

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\(^1\) Heewon Chang (Ph. D., University of Oregon) is Associate Professor of Education and Chair of Graduate Education Programs at Eastern University, Pennsylvania, U.S.A, where she teaches courses on multicultural education, research design, gender equity education, and global education.

\(^2\) Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Left Coast Press, 2008), 1.
choices. Chang’s autoethnographic method is a key research tool for developing my experiences into thoughts and devices to use in my artistic practice and explorations today. As mentioned above, I am interested in analyzing and identifying if there were any significant events or memories that I continue to recall, and if there are any lasting mental and physical consequences that remain and manifest in my daily life. To do this, I found it useful, and consistent with Chang’s method, to analyze my history and record a personal account of my formation from adolescence to young adulthood.

For a long time I have been afraid to admit I am gay to others, and worse, I was afraid to admit it to myself. It is not unusual today, which I can now comprehend, but being gay is not the most difficult part to come to terms with, it is everything else that arrived with it. I knew from about age eleven that I was different, but different means something else entirely when you are a child too young to comprehend the full consequence of your difference. That confusion mixed with the outdated and contradictory information I was being indoctrinated with in Catholic school and in a conservative home setting, only made my feelings of confusion and isolation stronger from my family, friends, and environment.

At about age thirteen, my confusion started to modify into a fear. As I began to discover and learn more about my sexuality, it was made very clear to me by my family, friends, church, school, and media that it wasn’t a desirable lifestyle to have or pursue. I was made to believe that there was something wrong with me, and that I should hate myself and all other queer people in the world. Depending on the source, hate was often accompanied by degradation, anger, or violence. These responses were all seen as
appropriate to my difference, one that I still did not fully understand, and over time, I came to believe and exemplify these falsehoods towards others.

Fort McMurray in the 1990’s and early 2000’s was not a hub of acceptance or a center for educational information on homosexuality. There was little material available to those, gay or straight, looking to learn more. At the time of my adolescence, it seemed there were more people around and on television that still believed homosexuality was a choice and something that could be altered or rehabilitated without consequence. To avoid the embarrassment of being ‘outed,’ and this confusing perspective on choice, I observed and taught myself how to act ‘straight’.

‘Straight-acting’ is a descriptor and term often used by gay men to differentiate one’s self from the limp-wristed, lisping, queer stereotype that seemed to come to exemplify the entire gay community in the media. It’s a way of staying in the ‘closet’ by dressing, acting, and aligning one’s actions and beliefs with that of masculine, straight men. It is a defense mechanism as the ‘fairy’ or ‘dandy’ is easily identified and targetable by slurs and violence. ‘Straight-acting’ creates a separation from these stereotypes, providing a barrier and protection from potential insult or crime regularly seen committed towards obvious, identifiable queers. One can hide behind the ‘straight’ façade.

How do you act ‘straight’? You perform and exemplify what is understood as heteronormative masculinity. According to Chambers\(^3\), “Heteronormativity emphasizes the extent to which everyone, straight or queer, will be judged, measured, probed, and

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\(^3\) Samuel Chambers (Ph. D., University of Minnesota) is Associate Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University where he teaches political theory and cultural politics.
evaluated from the perspective of the heterosexual norm. It means that everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight.\textsuperscript{4} The term masculinity varies by history and culture, however, for my purposes I will be using the definition I learned growing up in Fort McMurray. It is a hyper-masculinity that must always be proven and fought for within the sphere you reside, and must be kept up at all times. For instance, imagine a wolf pack entirely consisting of alpha males vying for top spot. Rules: Don’t be a pussy. Don’t be a fag. Don’t be a bitch. When challenged, you must fight. You must degrade and put-down others. School is for losers. Cops are pigs. Fuck the police. Smoke weed. Do cocaine. Drive a big truck with plastic testicles hanging from the rear bumper. Hit your girlfriend. Break things that do not belong to you. If you can’t solve something by fighting, run away from it like the rest of your problems, or drown them in alcohol.

Obviously not everyone falls into this categorization, but those people were invisible, and invisibility meant unpopularity, and unpopularity was worse than death for an impressionable, young teenager jockeying for some immature understanding of belonging. I made few friends that lasted through or after high school ended. The friendships that did last, and people I reunited with much later after high school, were with the ‘invisibles’. Reflecting back, I now wish I had chosen invisibility. I did things I am ashamed of including saying hurtful, derogatory things I did not mean to people I had nothing against. I stole, fought, broke the law, and it was all an illusion that would quickly end. The person I was and thought I needed to be was only a fictional

characterization created through the media and social portrayal of the hyper-masculine figure I thought I was supposed to exemplify.

We are all aware high school can be a difficult time. What I am attempting to explain is, for a confused, gay adolescent, this performance of masculinity only further confused and distorted the perception of my sexuality and who I was. I trained myself and created barriers so strong people never got to know the real me, including my own family. I became and exemplified another person entirely. Through a self-reflexive, autoethnographic lens, I am able to identify and analyze a small extent of the barriers I created. This leads me to speculate, who could and would I have been then, and now, if I had not had to construct those barricades in the first place just to feel safe in my own body and environment. Do we all share this thought when we reflect on our pasts? Or is this anxiety specific to someone who has experienced the personality shifting quality of the ‘closet’?

I continue to live with and reflect on these psychological consequences. I am constantly reminded of, or retreating back behind, my old façade and habits by things that would have made me shy away from an honest connection with someone. Occasionally I even overreact and put back up the masculine, ‘straight’ charade. I have conditioned myself to be afraid to enjoy the greatest things life has to offer, like dancing and singing, because I am afraid of appearing ‘too’ gay to a hypothetical bystander. I am afraid to say the wrong thing around certain people for fear of what they might think or say. I am afraid to kiss or hold my husband’s hand in public, which is an unbelievably terrible feeling. I am afraid of what others might think, say, or do, when in all actuality, they probably wouldn’t think, say, or do much, if anything at all. I can only imagine how this
must make my partner feel; he says he understands, but that doesn’t make it any less
difficult. I want to move on, but I will always remember the rules I was taught, the things
I did, and the people I hurt by the myriad ways I have memorized to think, act, and talk
today. This is what informs my daily life and is distilled into my art practice. It is a sort
of dealing with the things that have happened to me, the things I have done, and the
things that continue to confuse and haunt me about my past and how it affects my present
and future.

With my past so closely and strongly informing my practice, I believe I have the
freedom to want and allow the personal to come through in my work. I contemplate what
the American artist Keith Mayerson, who also happens to be gay, says about painting
today. He believes painting can have integrity and ideas as well as feelings and emotions,
and deal with the unconscious; all while making a gesture and having that speak of the
person that did it. The intervention in how I paint and its irregularity speaks to the
realness of my gesture and hopefully creates a dialogue with the viewer. I want the
painterly energy of my work to emerge while at the same time also speak to the culture I
am part of and critically engaging with, while still also existing and having a life of their
own as paintings. Painting is great for making an image but it’s also a physical
experience and can be reorganized to be however you see fit. That is what a painting can
still do that other mediums can’t. You can tell a human did it.

I can imagine a criticism arising as to how exactly I am exploring the connection
between masculine, virtuosic painting and my upbringing/sexuality by producing

5 Keith Mayerson, 8 Americans, (Interview Series by Tom Powel Imaging, Web, 2011).
masculine, virtuosic paintings. My response would be that in order to infiltrate any area of work or thought, one must commit wholeheartedly to that which they are investigating. The canon of masculine, virtuosic painters—Picasso, Gauguin, DeKooning, Richter—I am referencing and investigating also happens to coincide with a method of working that comes naturally to me despite my sexual orientation or my degree of masculinity or femininity. It is this very connection that I find most intriguing. I am part of a canon, as my agency and working method happen to align, while simultaneously categorized contrarily because of my sexuality, which I cannot control. The history of painting contains a paralyzing amount of ideologies on what is worth investigating and how to make a painting. The reason I make paintings the way I do is because, unlike the first seventeen years of my life, what is most important to me now is not trying to align or situate my art or practice with what has worked for others; I am attempting to find what works for me. I am positioned at the crux of two worlds, and yet I belong to both; it is this fact that I believe puts me in the optimum place for analyzing my chosen subject.

It took a long time to work up the courage and come to the realization that the person I am, and the positions I take, can coincide. While it may seem like I am trying to distance myself from other artists, I recognize my work strongly falls into a sort of postmodern, neoexpressionist category. My work stems from an art education primarily focused on stereotypical historical masculine painters such as Gauguin, Picasso, DeKooning, and Pollock. These artists together form an educational model of the late nineteenth and twentieth-century painting that was taught to me in school; a model that emphasizes the artist as masculine hero, creating or representing objects, including women, in their championed vision. While these artists represent different versions of
both masculinity and painting, they share the reputation as womanizers, conquering their subject, whether figurative or abstract, by exerting dominance over them as an appropriate mode of living and working. This way of working always confused me because I felt as a painter, I was drawn to and could do the same things these artists were doing, yet since I am gay, I felt excluded from their historical modes of production and living.

As in my youth, I was confused by the rigid emphasis and overrepresentation of these masculine modes of production and display in art history textbooks and looked for substitute visions. I am not discounting the contributions of these artists as they have all had significant influences on my work. Additionally though, I have had to educate myself on artists who queer this description of masculinity to interject an alternative narrative into the history and canon of male, figurative painters. Artists like Attila Richard Lukacs, Francis Bacon, and David Hockney have aided my practice by adding a queered lateral course of focus that combines and explores both the form and content I am interested in within painting simultaneously. These artists, while gay, represent forms of indulgence and self-fulfillment similar to the masculine nature of Gauguin or Picasso, and are also classified as virtuosic painters. Because of this, the canonical definition and understanding of virtuosic, masculine painting, and painters, is queered. By interjecting this queer tangent into this canon of painting, a page is added to a history that traditionally excluded the ‘other’ to the heteronormative male painter - the queer or feminine. The queer virtuosic painter, subverts the standard definition of masculine painter, while adding to and heightening the discourse on painting, without succumbing to the pitfalls of classification, such as ‘gay painting.’
I do not believe ‘gay painting’ exists. This term seems to be a reductive way of thinking that does not offer any valuable insights into the discourse of painting. However, there are gay artists who paint, which elicits a separate consideration, whether productive or not. The content of my work is not dependent upon my sexuality and I believe a viewer can appreciate the formal qualities of my paintings without the knowledge of my biography. However, to make the work I do, being gay is absolutely essential to who I am as an artist especially considering how the specific formation of my identity in my youth was fostered in the environment of Fort McMurray. I have spoken with John Brown, a Toronto artist who happens to be gay as well, about this issue. He does not believe there is such a thing as ‘gay painting’ either, but does say it is a position that creates a certain amount of indeterminateness in you.\(^6\) Again, this is an issue more concerned with the capacity for him and I to make a painting, and does not speak to the actual work itself, which I believe, is the only place where ‘gay painting’ could possibly exist. My gay identity and formation provides the framework that informs and drives my capacity to manipulate the formal elements in my paintings, while never becoming what the painting is about, unless I, or a viewer aware of my sexuality, so choose to make it.

I believe I can explore what is intrinsic to the way I work while making a painting that nods to my history and the history of painting. I am interested in the transformation that happens between the firing of synapses in my brain, down through my arm, through my hand, into the brush applying paint to canvas. I want to explore when and where an idea becomes a physical manifestation, and how closely to what I envisioned in my brain

is transferred to the canvas while at the same time not directly rendering or representing what I am thinking about illustratively. Simultaneously, I am curious if this very act is also different because of my queer perspective on the world. This is what attracts me to the medium of painting; it can do so many things concurrently, and what I see in my head almost never translates directly to what I am putting or seeing on the canvas. It becomes a dialogue between the painting and myself. The painting becomes as much of a contributor in the process and conversation as I am.

There is a confusion and excitement that exist for me in the unknown. I cannot make work specifically about the transmission of information between my brain and brush, or the degree to which my formative years had on my psyche, but colour and application of paint can suggest some interesting things. Suggestion is a very effective mode of communication that I use to create an experience for a viewer. This experience is dependent upon the content I choose to include in the work, which deals more with the human condition, physical, and psychological relationships than it does with my biography and sexuality. With the agency I feel I can include in my work, I try to elicit an experiential and individual response in viewers, a response that a viewer can still bring their own content to. I believe this comes in part from being willing to be honest and genuine, but extends to include the form and subject matter in my work. Paint colour and the way it is applied, can be a considered or intuitive decision made by me. I think that is enough to create an emotive reaction in a viewer, and hopefully not only does a viewer have a reaction to the work, but by only standing in front of the painting, finds some sort of honest connection with me, without ever having to physically meet.
I am more interested in personal exploration and experience in art and production today than anything else. Specifically to how this connects with my working method, I’ve been recalling memories and finding pictures from my past, associated to my life in some way, from the Internet, or purely imagined, and then relating to that source by projecting how I feel about it into the painting. The goal being, somewhere in the process my agency is able to flow through, or ideas about things I cannot control leak into my painting, and conceivably viewers can appreciate the work for what it is. Appropriating images and photographs from the Internet doesn’t necessarily have any direct connection to my own life, and yet they can be used as symbolic metaphors and also speak to ideas of sexuality, gender, masculinity and the human condition, which become characters in the work that transform throughout the stages of painting. They are no longer arbitrary in my life, but have become part of my working method and practice.

I think about painting as a means to affect, and have a connection with, another human being by merely placing an object in front of them for observation. My intention is to transmit a piece of myself through the painting by using specific philosophies of form and subject to create an active and working tension that acts psychologically, or even physically, on a viewer. It is a dialogue rooted in the personal and working instinctively that is not reliant on knowing exactly what every move means, but still allowing myself to practice and explore in order to create content. I believe using form and subject as a meditation and analyzing what transpires on the canvas could be used to find what is inherent to my life and practice.

The paintings I create can exist on their own, or as part of a greater whole. I am not consciously aware at the time of making it how one work will sit next to another. My
focus often depends on my feelings toward my subjects, which may explain how or why some pieces work well with others, and others appear completely different from the next. When there is a shift, it is perhaps due to that change in mood or time. The paintings I have been working on since undertaking graduate school have all had similar parameters to start: that of how I think, feel, and come to terms with my sexuality and the formation of my identity and personality in relation to others. This is only a beginning point however, and the work can shift content abruptly with a subtle change in form or subject, but the paintings could be read to follow my original pursuit. I would be fine if every painting does follow another in turn to create a narrative, however open-ended and loosely connected, all of them together telling a story. Hopefully however, each individual work also has its own narrative that says something about culture but still allows my subject matter and investigations into the painterly to come through.

I borrow from Mayerson some of his sentiments on what painting can still do today, that no other medium can. Like Mayerson, I am not interested in making a painting that is a mirror onto the world. It is not like a photo and not about technology. Painting for me, has to do something else; in a painting you can rearrange the world. I am not enticed by ‘here’s the world back at you’; I would rather invest in ‘here is something I’ve experienced and want to share with you’. It is not a documentary, not reporting; you can create allegorical narratives with fiction that are removed from reality and have their own freedom and do not have to be directly about this time. Painting can capture experiences that are almost impossible to quantify in any other means.\footnote{Keith Mayerson, \textit{8 Americans}, (Interview Series by Tom Powel Imaging, Web, 2011).}
When you look at a painting it is possible to feel like a small part of a bigger thing that cannot be, and does not need to be, understood or explained. The emotion or experience that you feel in front of a painting can bring about associations from your own life that you have not felt before, or at least have not felt in a very long time. It can take you out of the everyday monotony and transport you to another time or place, or make you recall something in your own life that would have otherwise remained suppressed. That split second is a joint experience between you, the work, and the artist, and at that exact moment you share a real understanding. In daily life, the Arts, or any other field, I strongly believe as long as people are willing to be honest with others, and ourselves, while embracing diversity, we will continue to have genuine and new experiences to share, and people will receive them happily and willingly.
Plate 1: Maxim Shaming, Charcoal and Oil on Canvas, 153 x 122 cm, 2014.
Plate 2: *At the End, Possibly*, Carborundum, Charcoal, Gold Leaf, and Oil on Canvas, 274 x 214 cm, 2014.
Plate 3: *Untitled*, Acrylic, Charcoal, and Oil on Canvas, 214 x 274 cm, 2015.
Plate 4: *Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, 183 x 153 cm, 2015.
Plate 5: *The Gifts*, Oil on Canvas, 183 x 157 cm, 2015.
Plate 6: *Boys Dressed as Bat and Bird (1)*, Acrylic, Charcoal, and Oil on Canvas, 183 x 214 cm, 2015.
Plate 7: *March*, Oil on Canvas, 274 x 248 cm, 2015.
Plate 8: *Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, 274 x 183 cm, 2015.
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Plate 19: *Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, 112 x 102 cm, 2016.
Plate 20: *Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, 229 x 198 cm, 2016.
Case Study

John Brown is Fond of Black

I was nervous going to John Brown’s studio. It would be my first time conducting a formal interview with an artist outside of academia. All the worry was for naught however, for the studio door quickly opened and there stood John Brown welcoming me in with open arms and a warm smile. As I walked in the rich smell of oil paint quickly filled my nostrils. His studio was what I have always imagined an artist’s studio would look like; old grey hardwood floors covered in dripped and splattered paint, twelve or fourteen foot high ceilings and white walls filled with notes, reference images, and paintings in various stages of completion. Brown’s lengthy stay at this studio was very evident by the accumulation of objects from plastics skulls and books to CD’s and brushes that could only come from years of committed studio practice. He shuffled me in and led me to an old, oil stained greenish-grey couch flanked by two equally appropriate studio chairs. I handed John a bottle of wine in thanks and our conversation began.

John Brown is fond of black, of red, of white, and a little of yellow. And while he may not be referring to them specifically, I cannot help but think of the four humors while looking at his work. The theory of the four humors comes from an ancient Greek and Roman system of medicine that posited the body and a person’s temperament was controlled and affected by an abundance or lack of four distinct bodily fluids known as humors. This system was the predominant understanding of the body until the invention of modern medical research in the nineteenth century. The humors and their corresponding temperaments are black bile/melancholic (despondent, quiet, analytical),
yellow bile/choleric (irritable, restless, aggressive), phlegm/phlegmatic (calm, thoughtful, patient), and blood/sanguine (lively, courageous, optimistic) (Bynum).

As I looked around Brown’s studio I observed each painting possessing its own distinct temperament that is influenced dramatically by both the colour and application of the paint applied to the surface. It’s an incredibly visceral experience standing in front of one of Brown’s paintings. The paint and wood is gouged out of layers upon layers of paint built up over a lengthy period of time from the surface of the work. It takes me away from paint on a surface and transports me instead into an unexpected yet non-threatening psychological state that does not happened very often to me when looking at art. My blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile boils as my eyes explore some works, and calms while with others. I try to read the work with an unencumbered, open mind, but wonder if Brown’s humors are out of balance.

I realize Humorism or Humoralism is no longer a valid medical science, but when viewing the work of John Brown, and art in general, that really does not matter to me at all. The humoral reading of Brown’s paintings is appropriate and relevant here in so far as there is not an exact science for understanding or explaining art, so I will not pretend to do so. I am studying the paintings of John Brown because as David Liss writes,

“Working outside of the arbitrary currents of fashion and even mainstream artistic discourse, it is Brown’s intention to probe beyond temporal considerations into deeper, more complex territories, from visceral physicality to multifaceted layers of consciousness, and from the infinitesimal to the infinite. John Brown’s world is characterized by a fascination with the enduring mysteries that lie beyond the constructs of language and the grasp of reason and logic; beyond that which is visible and known, and ultimately inexplicable and unknowable (Liss, 11).”
David Liss is the Artistic Director and Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art; he wrote the ‘Foreword’ for the 2009 John Brown catalogue produced for the 2008 survey exhibition “The Visceral THING” at MOCCA. Liss’ words provide a good overview of John Brown’s interests. I am captivated by the way Brown explores content and image making without a need for explanation; he is interested in the places that cannot be explored and ideas that cannot be explained in words. Liss is onto something in his ‘Foreword’, but I believe he is speaking not only of John Brown, but many artists when he expressed the above statement. Liss later states more specifically,

“[Brown] is passionately committed to a highly personal vision that encompasses an expansive spectrum of lived experience. His practice is, at its essence, an open and continually evolving negotiation of the uncertainties and sublime wonders of being that are common to us all. Though embedded in tradition, his innovative approach to picture making is deeply infused with contemporary relevance and connected to the culture of our times. He expands upon a timeless lineage of creative and imaginative thought that seeks to come to terms with the often contradictory and confounding aspects of existence (Liss, 11).”

I find Liss’ statements compelling but they do not delve deep enough into why Brown is trying to come to terms with certain aspects of existence, or exactly what lived experiences he uses as inspiration for his work; this is something I endeavoured to explore further in our meeting and in this case study. The paint application, or the scraped off removal of material, in Brown’s paintings may not be indicative of his humours being out of balance, but I believe the particular hues, and more specifically, the shade of black that Brown uses is a motif that holds a key to understanding the work, and Brown more concretely. I have found the colour, or shade, black to be reoccurring in the work for some time, decades in fact, and is something I would like to investigate more closely. I
would also like to situate Brown’s work and ideas within a historical framework. While it does not need a specific classification, I find it helpful for understanding the work more succinctly. I would like to offer that Brown’s work sits somewhere between that of William Turner and Francis Bacon or Philip Guston. Brown acknowledges Bacon and Guston as significant influences, so I will focus on connections I have found with Turner in this case study.

Something Liss, and the MOCCA catalogue in general, glosses over almost completely is the important biographic information that strongly informs the comprehension of Brown’s work. While a general audience and viewer may not in fact need to know all the biographic information, for the purpose of my work and this case study it became increasingly significant. John Brown is gay, something we have in common, he also grew up in the conservative, working-class, mining town of Sudbury, and again similarly, I grew up in the conservative, working-class, mining town of Fort McMurray. Both of these pieces of information could be considered happenstance; however, for a gay youth and artist, such a setting is incredibly significant and formative of identity and perspectives toward other people and the world including, specifically, the way we learn to carry ourselves, socialize with other men, predominantly, and within the environment in which we are part of. The significance of the dirty, grey-brown colours of such cities, as well as the feeling of needing to hide ones true identity, will become clearer shortly.

Without having to ask, Brown began explaining why he believes so many of his paintings were and remain predominantly shades of black and white. He thinks growing up in Sudbury, a grey, industrial town, significantly affected the way he sees the world
and transmits it into his work. In addition, having been raised with black and white photography, television, and newspapers, led to a familiarity with the contrast and identification of figures and objects represented in this manner. Furthermore, Brown went on to study photography in school, again, in black and white.

When colour does appear in his work, he states that it is intuitive. He does not choose colours specifically for their supposed psychological effects, but instead allows himself to make the decision and trusts that he is making the correct choice. Brown does not deny that colours contain associations with psychological states and feelings, but that is not the only way to go about making a painting. This approach works for Brown, but intuition is one way of saying you are not thinking about or over analyzing your choices. Brown has been painting for decades. At this point in his career, whether it is intuition or just a familiarity with paint, Brown does not need to spend hours debating and contemplating his choices. Brown makes decisions and returns to them later whether they work or not. One of the greatest things about paint, and Brown’s practice, is that if a colour or mark doesn’t work, it can be painted over, or scraped away. Brown does not believe that every mark, every colour, every scratch, has to be completely calculated and considered; this can often lead to an over-determination in the work. He allows his human agency to come through, and that is often more than enough.

The colour in Brown’s work does elicit physical and psychological responses, but a viewer does not benefit from having them explained. It is enough to know you are experiencing something true to life, true to being human, standing in front of that painting. Brown is not alone in his approach and endeavours with colour; I believe
Kandinsky (1866-1944), the Russian abstract painter, adds credibility to this approach to image making in the following quotation.

“…Whether the physical effect of colour is a direct one (…) or whether it is the outcome of association, is perhaps open to question. The soul being one with the body, the former may well experience a psychic shock, caused by association acting on the latter. For example, red may cause a sensation analogous to that caused by flame, because red is the colour of flame. A warm red will prove exciting; another shade of red will cause pain or disgust through association with running blood. In these cases colour awakens a corresponding physical sensation, which undoubtedly works upon the soul.” (Kandinsky, 23-6; 36-9; 39; 40-1).

Or maybe it is both, direct and associative, and there is a fine line that runs through the work, or perhaps there is not one at all. Either way, we can see that colour acts upon a viewer in a way that does not need an explanation. It is enough to know that it is happening. Further to this, Gauguin (1848-1903), the French post-impressionist, adds,

“… we have just pointed out and then explained colour as living matter; like the body of a living being. Now we must talk about its soul, that elusive fluid which by means of intelligence and the heart has created so much and stirred so much – about colour that helps our imagination to soar, opening a new door onto mystery and the infinite.” (Gauguin, 138-46).

I believe Gauguin is attempting to describe how colour can act upon the body and soul in a way that transcends our need to explain exactly why it is happening. We know it is happening, it has grasped our intelligence and heart, and yet without knowing exactly why, we trust that it opens us up to the unexplainable, and we are happy and willing to go there.
Along this line of the extent of unknowable phenomenon, as mentioned before, John Brown is gay. At first I did not think this played any significant roll in his work, other than is gives him life experience to draw upon. However, upon further contemplation, it has become apparent to me that this fact is not so easily brushed off. Speculatively, being gay is not as shocking or provocative today as it was in the 1950’s and 60’s when Brown was growing up in conservative Sudbury. As I share this similarity with Brown, I have to conclude that the way being gay in 1990’s to 2000’s Fort McMurray has influenced my life can only be seen as exponentially greater to the way it effected Brown and thusly his work. I used to think that because sexuality is not always a significant factor for heterosexual artists that it should be as insignificant for homosexual ones. But with a queer upbringing in a conservative setting comes a permanently queered alignment and perspective to all aspects of life and can be expected to arise in the way a gay artist works.

The way Brown uses and applies paint is equally, or more important, to the way I have just explained the way colour working upon a viewer. The thick application, in unity with the colour of paint used, speaks to issues of concern that Brown is interested in exploring such as the effect of feeling queer to a society at a young age. Brown believes growing up in Sudbury had significant effects on him. Being gay in a small industrial city is not easy. Brown recalls wearing blue jeans and boots just like everyone else so as not to draw too much unwanted attention. He knew he was different, but did what he could to fit in with the hetero crowd surrounding him. When Brown attended art school, he recalled this early fashion education coming in handy, as some straight schoolmates of his who dressed differently were gay-bashed while Brown was left alone. John did not
mention if he ever was gay-bashed but he did state that a certain amount of indeterminateness comes from being gay, a position that creates a certain amount of indeterminateness in you. Similarly, this describes Brown’s approach to subject matter and working on a painting; he does not want to prescribe a specific experience for a viewer, but intentionally leaves an amount of indeterminateness with the work. John made it clear to me that he did not want to be tied to a specific position or ideology with his work. The full effects of his experiences will never be fully known to me, but I can now see and apply some of Brown’s personal history in his work.

I would like to explain further something mentioned above, the way Brown incorporates an amount of indeterminateness in his work. Some of Brown’s paintings may resemble specific figures or objects, but the paintings themselves are about much more than those subjects. A photographic reference is only the armature for one of Brown’s works. The process of painting, additive and reductive, is of much more interest to Brown than simply representing an image based on a photograph. Brown uses black and white printouts, sometimes manipulated in Photoshop, to begin his painting process. He uses them as building blocks, never becoming dependent on the image, but constructing from it, painting over its shape, distorting its character, allowing his painting to transform and mutate, evolving in its own way. He does not fight it, he encourages and nurtures it, fosters its development until it is working for him.

Sometimes this takes months or years, sometimes he has to come back to pieces years later and rework them. Brown acknowledges that this may be a little excessive and

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8 Jason Stovall, Interview with John Brown, 2015.
says as he points to a sort of contact sheet, “Why didn’t I leave it here, or here?”9 I can see why he would be reflective, every one of the twenty or thirty images on the pages look like completed paintings in their own right to me. Brown’s approach to image making opened my eyes to a way of working that is developed out of a relationship with the image, a photograph, but does not become dependent on it in any way. The manner in which Brown uses paint, applies it, and scrapes it away, speaks to so much more than the simple image or photograph that begins the painting. The materiality and surface of his work is incredible when you consider that all his paintings in the past were built up using brushes no bigger than a half inch. For the sake of time now however he has moved on to using bigger brushes as well and exploring what that new mark can say for him.

As some works take upward of a year to complete, and other works are revisited over periods of several years and go through multiple renditions, I find it important to touch here on time. Brown is interested in the human condition and coming to terms with our mortality; I can only assume that his practice and lengthy approach to image making in some way makes him not only give part of himself to a painting, but the paintings themselves reflect back onto Brown at various stages in their development. A year is a very long time, and a lot can change in that time, as we could see in one of Brown’s ‘contact sheets’. If that much changed and is reflected by the various stages of a painting, then I must assume that Brown has gone through as many or more stages and emotions as his work. That is an effect and relationship I cannot write about or begin to know.

9 Ibid.
Paintings become entities in Brown’s studio. Some titles of works and ongoing series include: *Grimm, Drone, Autopsy, Disease, Human Heads, and 10 Attempts to Imagine the Inside of my Body*. These titles alone bring to mind a melancholic introspection and perhaps one could even go so far as to say a fascination with existence and mortality. The most identifiable of imagery is present in the *Human Heads* paintings, an ongoing series started in 1986 and worked on over many years. These paintings are
obviously figuratively based, but quickly break down into abstraction in many cases. Characteristic of the series is black or grey paint surrounding a ghostly, highly worked over human head. The paintings are all oil on wood supports, and sixty by forty-eight inches in size. They are scuffed, scarred, and lacerated. Oil is added in parts, and scraped down to the wood support in others, and often further down into that surface as well. The heads become a sort of mask, so simplified by their distortion that they allow for a viewer to project their own meaning onto the work. For Brown they are pseudo portraits, possibly even self-portraits examining his identity, one hidden, and never truly shown and expressed until much later in life.

I find the phenomenon of masking\(^\text{10}\); the more simplified you make something, the more you can relate to it, incredibly powerful for understanding Brown’s work, and gay psychology. This raised many questions for me about Brown’s work, as well as for my own life: Is pretending to be straight simplifying our existence in order to more successfully fit into a hetero-normative society? Is that how we have adapted in order to avoid persecution and harm? What happens to us when we try so hard for so many years to wear a mask that represents someone else? What happens when that mask is finally removed?

These and other mind-sets have stuck with Brown and intrigue me deeply. He mined them in series like *10 Attempts to Imagine the Inside of my Body, Disease*, and *Grimm*. The gay body must be different than the straight body. There must be something different on the inside, some reason, and some change that makes us unique. What does it

\(^{10}\) Scott McLeod, *Understanding Comics*, 1994.
look like? This was the starting point for some of these works; pieces that were not only about internal exploration and indeterminateness, but increasingly met with external forces and confusion brought on from world events, and reactions to them, such as the Stonewall Riots and the Aids Crisis. Brown would have been sixteen during Stonewall, and in his thirties-forties during the Aids Crisis. He did not speak about these times, other than what he had already mentioned about knowing he was different and not being sure exactly what made him so, or why.

I believe the strength of Brown’s work comes from their realness and relationship to the human body on a mentally and physically sensitive level. It is because of the way Brown handles surface and form and because it contrasts so starkly with how Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) characterizes a new canon of classical form,

“An entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off is eliminated, hidden or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface of the body’s ‘valleys’ acquires an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world. All attributes of the unfinished world are carefully removed, as well as all signs of its inner life. (Bakhtin, 320).”

Brown would cringe while reading Bakhtin’s characterization; it goes against everything he puts into one of his paintings. David Batchelor11, when describing

11 David Batchelor (1955-) is a Scottish artist and Senior Tutor of Critical Theory in the Department of Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art in London.
minimalist architecture and its characteristic whitewashing, provides another description Brown would wholeheartedly oppose.

“Not a place of fluids, organs, muscles, tendons and bones all in a constant, precarious and living tension with each other, but a vacant, hollow, whited chamber, scraped clean, cleared of any evidence of the grotesque embarrassments of an actual life. No smells, no noises, no colour; no changing from one state to another and the uncertainty that comes with it; no exchanges with the outside world and the doubt and the dirt that goes with that; no eating, no drinking, no pissing, no shitting, no sucking, no fucking, no nothing. (Batchelor, 19).”

Brown is the complete antithesis to Batchelor’s words; his work is absolutely about the fluids and organs of a human body in constant tension, the evidence of the grotesque embarrassments of actual life, and all the uncertainty and everything else that comes with it. All of these things are present in Brown’s work. The oil paint becomes the fluids, organs, muscles, and everything else. It is the presence of an actual life that gives the work its honesty and truthfulness. Life is full of doubt and embarrassment; that is what makes us human and allows us the opportunity to share something, a closeness, a shared experience perhaps, with one another.

I want to further mine Brown’s work and I believe examining the paintings of William Turner and drawing connections to the modes of representation could provide some additional insights. Nicholas Mirzoeff (1962- ) is a visual culture theorist and professor in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University. Mirzoeff wrote on Turner in the 2006 Journal of Visual Culture, “the figure at the center of the 1843 painting is hard to see, challenging vision and visuality alike by its refusal of clarity.” (Mirzoeff, 62).
Mirzoeff is referring to Turner’s painting *Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) – The Morning After the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (1843), but I believe the same statement can be borrowed for analyzing Brown’s work. Like Turner’s painting, the *Human Heads* paintings, and others, are refusing to clarify themselves unto us. The figures are hidden, destroyed even, and make no effort to console our desire to grasp onto an anchor point. No eyes to meet, no mouth to glimpse. Once again this picks up on the indeterminateness we have examined previously and continues to elude explanation. Mirzoeff continues,
“Rather than forcing Turner’s painting into one experimental classification or another, it might be preferable to see it as a struggle with visuality. “ (Mirzoeff, 62).

Like Turner, rather than forcing his work into a specific classification, it may be easier to understand Brown’s work as a struggle with visuality, as well as materiality. This struggle can be understood metaphorically and literally in Brown’s paintings. Brown does not have a desire to comfort you with his work; many of his paintings make me writhe as much as I can imagine they do to him when he is battling to make them in his studio. The fact that Brown’s work can move beyond the visual and known and raise questions about existence is a testament to Brown’s handling of material. The mixture of colour-form with the wide subject matter base of Brown’s work allows for the myriad readings they possess while simultaneously holding onto their autonomy and indeterminateness.

Another similarity between Brown and Turner is their approach to tone and contrast, including the play between light and dark, again, both metaphorically and literally again.

“Turner held that darkness was an active optical force in tension with light, rather than being the simple absence of light. So as much as Light and Colour is clearly about light, it also finds a place for shades, literally and pictorially.” (Mirzoeff, 62).

The meanings for light, and shade, in the work of William Turner has been investigated and definitions of ‘shade,’ that of the absence of light, but also the presence of ghosts or supernatural beings, has been applied to it. I think the same investigative approach could be applied to Brown’s work, with additional themes attached to the motif of ‘shade’ and what form that entity takes exactly in Brown’s work, remembering that
‘shade’ was/is also a term for ghost. I mentioned earlier that Brown is interested in aspects of the human condition and mortality, so I find it productive to draw out the correlation to light and dark more in Brown’s work. We could examine many of Brown’s series, but the *Human Heads* series seems to deal most evidently with a struggle between divergent poles. There is a tension between figuration and abstraction, surface, and colour, all which raise questions as to what is causing this. If these works are self-portraits, why are they so distorted?

In the work *Human Head #6*, 1987/1988/2003, the head is almost completely obliterated by scrapes and gouges. There is a faint evocation of what could have been a collar from a shirt and lines where shoulders could have once occupied the picture plain. What we are mostly left with is an abstracted white, red, and black colour-field painting with a faded remnant of a figure. This work exemplifies Brown’s intention to explore physicality, the mystical, and the unknowable; but does it get at the existential and moral questions we are asking? Once again we are left with an abyss of questions, uncertainty and indeterminateness that only serves to strengthen my fascination to the paintings. A helpful and much appreciated insight comes from Dennis Lee, a Canadian editor and critic based in Toronto, in his piece for Brown’s 2009 catalogue. He wrote,

“With the ghosts of figuration animating the textures and gestures… The Vocabulary of these paintings wasn’t just a clever add-on to the way things are; it aligned with the real. And each painting was a fresh act of interrogation, of exploration” (Lee, 87).

Lee sees the works as being as invested in the very same questions we are asking of them. They are not going to provide us with any answers as each painting is trying to figure out its own existence as much as we are. This observation was eye-opening for me and once again added another layer of intrigue to Brown’s work.

Brown thinks people always want him to paint his life. But he has already done that. The way he paints has said all that needs to be said about his life, and then some. Brown has investigated the internals of his body without ever seeing it; he conveys the messiness of life, its pain, love, and anger in every painting, and he has explored the unknown existential questions he has, and we all share. The formal considerations in
Brown’s paintings are adapted so appropriately to his subject matter that the content is there without ever having to say a word to a viewer, without a viewer ever having to recognize a face or shape in the work. Even the titles added, as descriptive to the work as they are, are arbitrary additions that we do not actually need in order to get a real and emotional connection from the work. Brown has painted the things in his life that have interested and influenced him, and with the connections to Turner and other biographical information, I find John Brown and his work to be some of the most honest, true to life, human things I have ever witnessed in this world full of masks and sterility.
Bibliography


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