



Contemporary

2006 annual

50 international emerging artists

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Untitled, 2002. All images courtesy: the artist

MATTHEW BROWN

LEE HENDERSON

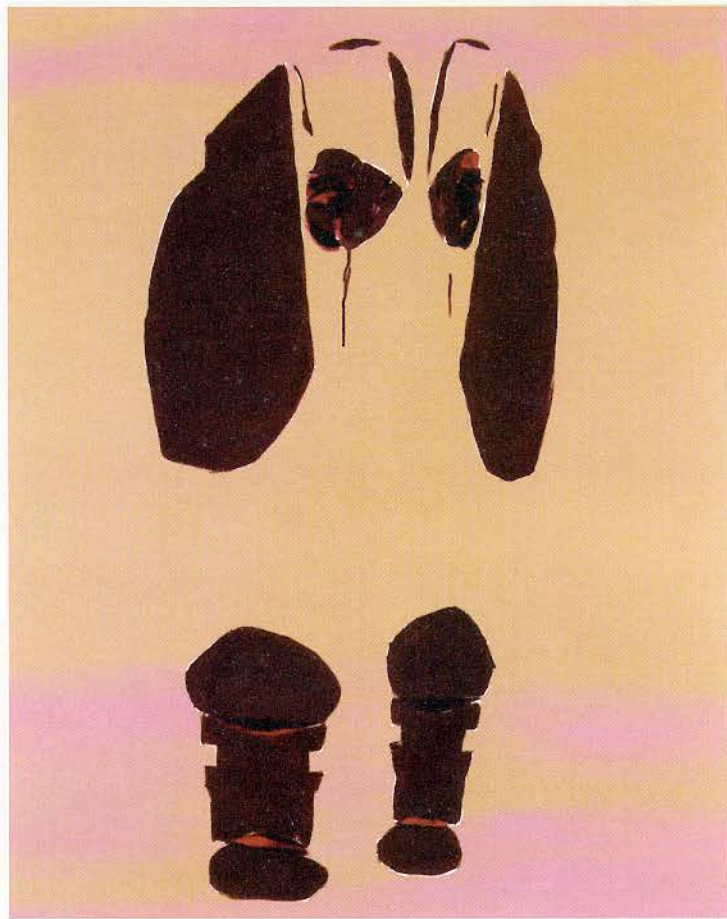
THE painter of the contemporary portrait is bombarded with phrenological options. Today the object of representation is more immediate, but also far more indirect. Where there once sat a patron or model, now sits the flatscreen and modem. In Vancouver artist Matthew Brown's recent series of oil paintings, the portrait has been restructured as a site where aesthetics occur, not empathy. Brown has taken portraiture to the domain of the abstract. At once reminiscent of fossilised algae (earth's first death-masks), as well as airbrush graffiti (the gnomonic tag is also a form of portraiture), Brown's faces are enigmatic, unsettling false icons.

As a founding member of the five-person collaborative drawing group the Lions (www.lionspile.ca), Brown does equally experimental line drawings. The Lions are like a more anarchistic version of the Royal Art Lodge. And indeed Brown's paintings begin as loose, wiry drawings, like distended and re-bent coat-hangers. Brown keeps a file of them that he calls 'drunk drawings'. Then he scans the drawings into his computer, often upwards of 100 at a time, and takes these wobbly outlines and sobers them up with a special randomiser effect in Photoshop that he coded himself. Among those files he culls the ones with potential and modifies them further before printing them off to use as working sketches for canvasses. The contrasting processes of drawing and computer programming are represented in the handling. Brown paints a computer's hard-edged polygons and morphic planes of colour with a loose, expressive

handling more like a Basquiat than a Ryan McGinness. The result is a mask-like image with a frantic grassroots energy, as much of it as other contemporary West Coast artists like Chris Johansen and Eli Langer, or the cedar masks of the Northwest Coast Indian carvers whose local art history has endured for over 5,000 years.

Not intended to be a marvel of depiction, Brown's portraits form a negative impression, a psychogenic blot which the viewer, as anyone familiar with Rorschach knows, fills in with his own hang-ups. Simian wisdom, lactating marine life, or the goblin faces on shelled insects are not necessarily references endorsed by the artist. They are morphologies in lieu of bodies. No flesh or bones, just wedges and shades, but still imbued with an intelligence. The portrait is of the objectification of the portrait. By incorporating Photoshop into the process, Brown is capable of parody in the result. Rather than submit his aesthetic to Photoshop, as many young painters are doing, Brown has written his own program for the application, and one based on chance, no less. And his rough, expressive handling subverts the digital, which in turn, denies the presence of the hand. This very modern paradox is at the core of Brown's art.

LEE HENDERSON IS CONTEMPORARY MAGAZINE'S VANCOUVER CORRESPONDENT, AND A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR FOR BORDER CROSSINGS MAGAZINE. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF THE BROKEN RECORD TECHNIQUE (PENGUIN)



All images: *Untitled*, 2004

