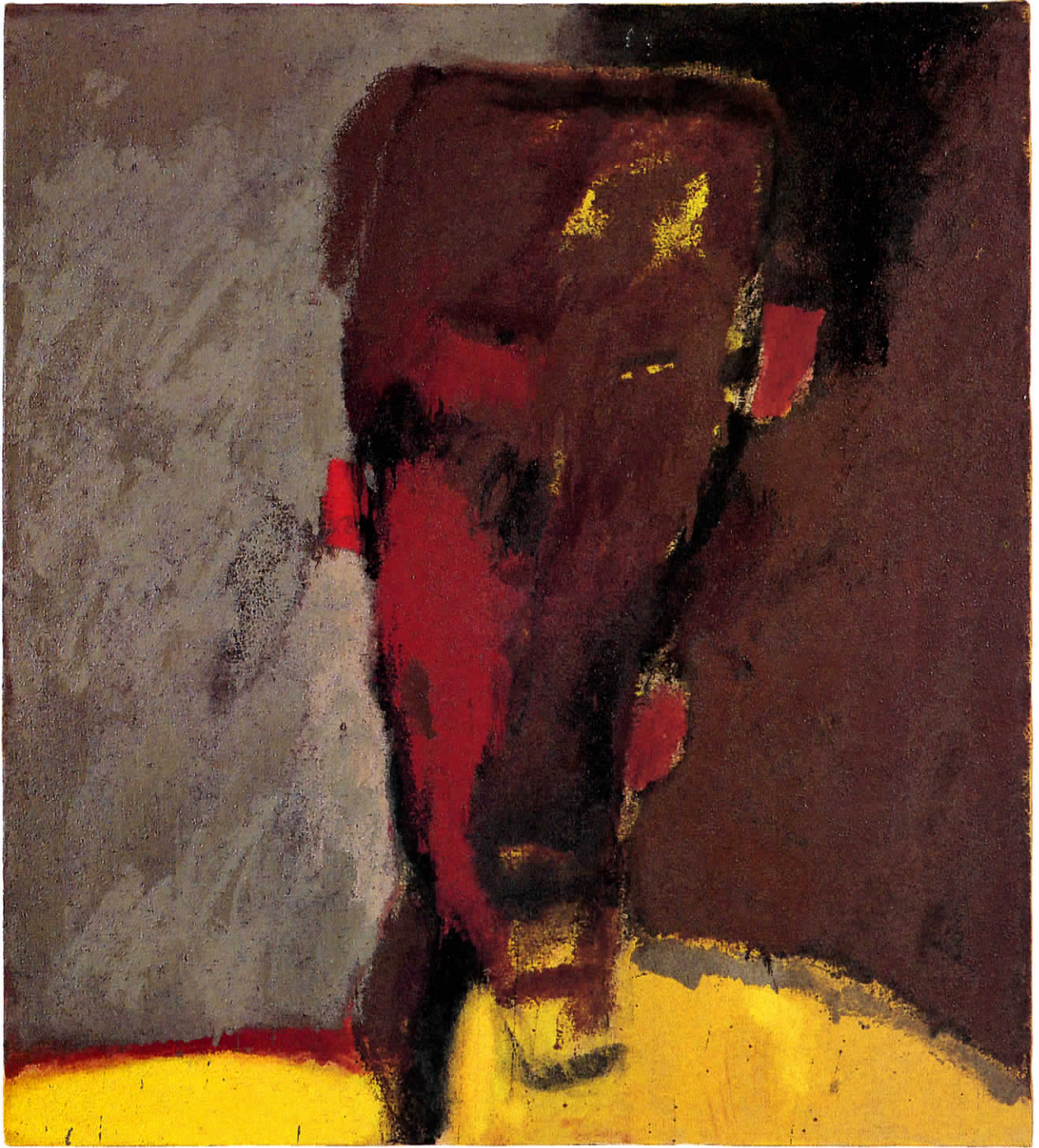


James Brown in his Manhattan studio, flanked by a recent painting in a 17th-century frame and a feather sculpture made in the early '70s. Facing page: Moroccan IV, 1992; alkyd on linen.



fanfare

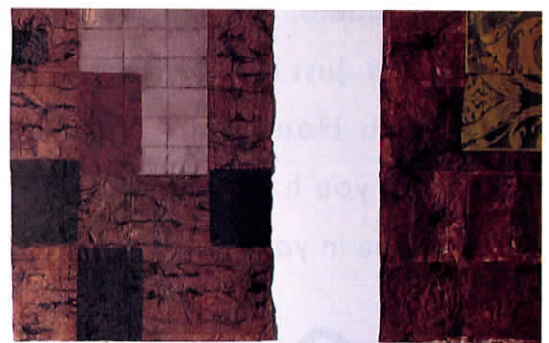
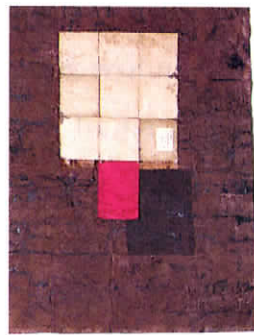
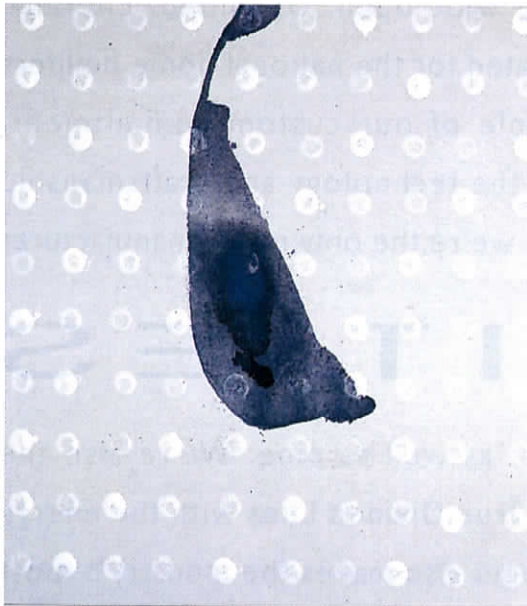


# james brown

**His work records the wanderings of a worldly hunter-gatherer**

James Brown is a scavenger and a nomad. This lanky, dandified man has an eagle eye for the hidden treasures in antiques shops, flea markets, and souks and a nose for the real-estate deal (his new Manhattan studio is a case in point). Brown's impulse to collect is a vital part of his *assemblage* intelligence. But although he has worked out of studios all over the world—in Tangier, Tokyo, Naples, New York, and Paris—Brown adheres to the ragpicker's ethos, finding beauty in unlikely objects and making of his life, as well as ▷

**TEXT BY BROOKS ADAMS PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD EBERLE**



**Above:** *Salt (Grey) I*, 1990; paint on linen. **Right:** *Atmospheric Effects*, 1994; mixed media.  
**Below:** Works on paper and blue paintings in progress.

his art, a pared-down collage of radiant essentials.

Raised in Los Angeles and educated in Paris, Brown remains a cosmopolitan mix of regionalisms. Born in 1951, he grew up in a succession of 1920s Spanish-style houses and was influenced by his mother's passion for ceramics and his father's talent for woodworking. According to the artist, "My parents bought Early American furniture together at auctions in collège and collected pewter when I was young." The Brown kids were given a studio in the garage, complete with an Oriental carpet, big pillows, and a swinging bamboo "cocoon" chair. Summers and weekends were spent in Laguna Beach, where Brown, a fledgling hippie, first imbibed Bohemian atmosphere, while his grandmother "still insisted on formal sit-down dinners." It was his grandmother, the picaresquely named Georgia Brown, who sent him to Europe for the first time, when he was 14. Brown "fell in love with Paris in four days flat" and, when he was 20, interrupted college to move there.

## Brown finds beauty in unlikely objects, creating pared-down collages of radiant essentials



The artist stayed the next ten years "very loosely enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux Arts." His real education took place in the Marché d'Aligre, "a true, traditional neighborhood market" near the Bastille. "I would go there every morning at 8 A.M. on my Solex to watch the merchants unpacking fruit and vegetables, furniture, books, and clothes." These diverse goods would later become the materials of his art. At the market he found folded maps that he started using in collages around 1987. To this day he paints on the linen backings of old maps that, when unfolded, begin to suggest far-off visions of Cartesian order. "I respect fabric as much as paper and see no difference in the way I use them."

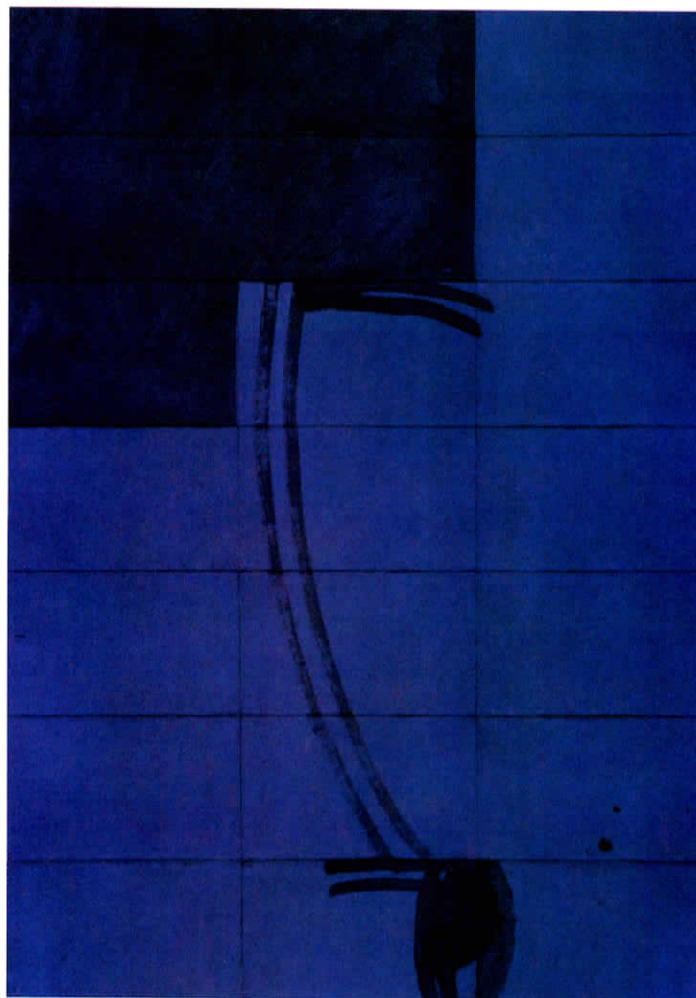
During the '70s Brown traveled extensively, visiting Morocco when he was 21, "buying Spanish black coats and sleeping in the hay." He journeyed frequently to Venice, where he made sculptures out of tied and bundled leaves culled from his walks around the city. Once he sailed from Venice to Alexandria and lived in the Egyptian desert for six weeks. There ▷

he created feather and fabric sculptures that were exhibited in his first one-man show, in Holland in 1978.

In 1979, restless in Paris, the artist tried living in New York for a winter, and moved there more permanently in 1982. He rented a studio in a burned-out building on the Lower East Side and made his mark with graffiti-esque paintings of big, primitive heads and totemic figures. But, feeling that his work was being too easily lumped together with that of the other '80s icon makers, he returned to Europe, living mostly in Paris until 1990.

Under the tutelage of the charming and mischievous Neapolitan art dealer, the late Lucio Amelio, Brown became well known as an artist of elegant abstractions. Their hatched forms are hieroglyphs of his earlier figures, only now rendered as a few bold strokes on unusual supports such as coral, Japanese fabric samples, and lead.

In the course of his wanderings, after sojourning in Spain with his wife, the artist happened to go to Tangier. The atmosphere of that evocative city, the Interzone immortalized by William Burroughs and romanticized by Paul Bowles, seemed so right to Brown that his wife suggested he stay for a week. Thus began a semiannual pilgrimage during which the artist goes to Tangier in August, rents a room to use as a studio in the funky Hôtel Continental, and decamps every day to swim and sleep at the first-class El Minzah hotel. Last summer Brown made his most recent group of big collages using maps, old photographs of flora and fauna, and postcard images of Arab people. These were shown in his first Moroccan exhibi-



**Goods from the Marché d'Aligre would later become the materials of his art**



**Top:** *Blue Salt (Winter) XVI, 1990; synthetic polymer on linen.*

**Right:** Old fabrics, books on art history and collecting, and paints characterize Brown's Manhattan studio.

tion, at the Galerie d'Art Meltem in Casablanca. Brown's commitment to working and showing in Morocco confirms his status as a latter-day Orientalist in the tradition of Delacroix, Matisse, and countless other artists who have been enthralled by the light and life in North Africa.

Brown's Orientalism extends not only to China and Japan but to the exotic reaches of European and American decorative arts. Some of his newest works are made with brown paper he bought in Japan ten years ago but "never figured out how to use until now." He begins by pinning collage elements to the paper and then adds painted washes and natural fruit stains. He also scrawls penciled lines that are loosely inspired by illustrations of German Renaissance and Mannerist goldsmiths' work. Best of all are the pieces of French Deco silk jacquard that come from curtains which "used to hang in my children's bedroom, until they became completely rotted by the sun."

Walking into Brown's new studio in the Chelsea district of Manhattan is like stepping into one of his opulently Minimalist collages. With the help of the designer Bill Katz, the artist has inflected the 4,000-square-foot floor-through with a few clean white walls, leaving the outside walls and floors beautifully dilapidated. The results are refined yet raw, patinated yet bare.

The floor, for instance, has pretty much been left in its original state, a patchwork of diagonal floorboards and 1940s linoleum that the artist washed in order to reveal a distinctive feathers-on-faux-wood pattern. With one of his 1970s feather pieces—recently unpacked after years in storage—hanging next to the period frames he collects, the new studio reveals Brown's genius for picking, choosing, and letting well enough alone. ★