

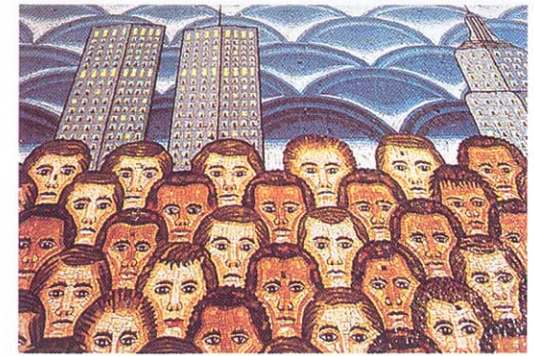
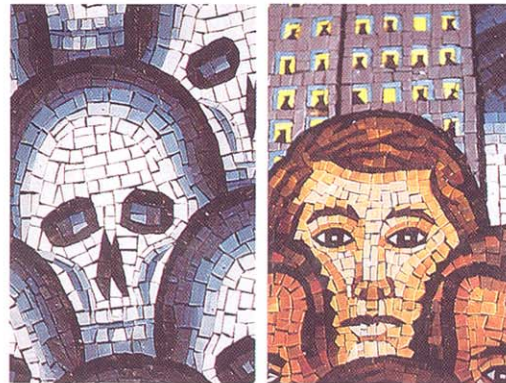
The Roger Brown Mosaic

Installed high on a wall, vividly patterned, and unsparing in its image of mortality, Roger Brown's mosaic lends a compelling presence to the sky-lit Duane Street entrance of 290 Broadway. Even without the artist's statement (printed elsewhere in this brochure and displayed near the artwork), there is much for the eye to take in. Look up and you see a tapestry of skulls conjoined like giant hexagonal tiles. Look higher and the skulls become a sea of gaunt faces—black, white, many hues in between—rising to a New York cityscape where stylized depictions of the Brooklyn Bridge, World Trade Towers, and Empire State Building appear amid dark, wedge-shaped clouds. Jewel-like and yet horrific, Brown's honeycomb composition hovers somewhere between old-world cathedral art and Cambodian killing field, with a dose of M.C. Escher-type psychedelia and the mixed-message festiveness of Day of the Dead or Hallowe'en decoration. Its archaeological tone underscored by the mosaic medium, the work reads like a

subterranean cross-section of an urban gravesite. And logically so. The Mosaic is sited above New York's widely celebrated African Burial Ground.

This 18th-century resting place for ten to twenty thousand enslaved Africans and working-class people, a corner of which was discovered during digging to create a foundation for 290 Broadway, is commemorated in a grassy plot next to Brown's artwork and will be explored in a planned education center behind it. Before construction resumed, an archaeology project yielded the skeletal remains of over 400 people and related artifacts that continue to be studied today by scholar-scientists at Howard University in Washington, D.C. For the thousand of New Yorkers who followed the excavation in the news and visited the site, the episode was deep, emotionally loaded. Exposing a hidden history, the Burial Ground underscored not only hardship and socio-economic divisions but also connections with the African motherland. Its discovery and contents thwarted the notion that slavery had been the exclusive domain of the American South.

Brown's imagery, as noted above, pays homage to the African Burial Ground, but the core theme of the mosaic, as the artist tells us in his statement, is the tragic toll of the AIDS epidemic. Brown's "mosaic of death heads in memory of those of all races who have suffered and died too soon" stunningly visualizes the indiscriminate march of the disease in a city that, as of 1995, has had more



reported AIDS cases than Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, and Washington, D.C., combined. Brown, who is based in Chicago also hit hard by AIDS, tackled this difficult theme after careful, intuitive deliberation fed by the implications of the African Burial Ground. As he explains, "My theme uses the gaunt faces of AIDS victims interspersed by race and contrasted to the skulls of the slavery victims found in the Black cemetery. The city rises in the background as if growing out of the heap of human misery left behind."

An Alabama native raised in the God-fearing Church of Christ, Brown is known for the disturbing edge with which his clear, emblematic compositions record contemporary life. His style was first formed at commercial design school in Chicago, where he moved after dropping out of religious college in Tennessee. As a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, Brown absorbed a smorgasbord of influences that still inform his vision: folk art, flea-market kitsch, film-noir, Surrealism, Japanese prints, Native American art, and early Renaissance painting. Bucking the tide of New York Minimalism, Brown and like-minded Chicago "Imagists" pursued an eccentric, narrative, communicative art in the late 1960s with a quirky intensity not approached locally until the emergence of the manic, street-smart styles of East Village artists in the 1980s. Frequently finding its way to publications (including Time Magazine covers on September 17, 1990, and April 19, 1993), Brown's work has been exhibited in New York since 1975 and is represented in