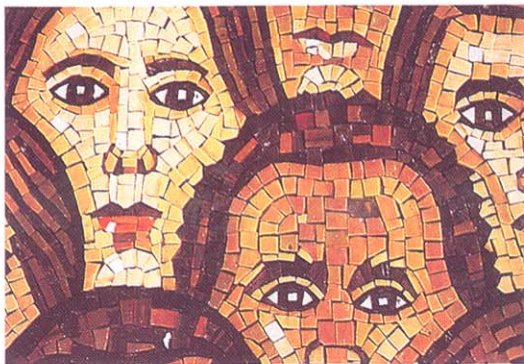


three of its museums. The artist's attraction to horrific news-driven subjects, which he paints along with cityscapes and tourist vistas, makes AIDS a natural theme for him to pursue.

Brown has worked on a mosaic project before—an allegory of arts and science in the form of Icarus and Daedalus in flight for a financial office building in Chicago in 1992. This method of imagemaking, in which shaped stone, ceramic, or glass tiles are set into concrete, dates back to pre-Roman times—the Minoan culture of ancient Crete—and can be seen in countless older buildings and subway stations in New York. Late Medieval Italy was a highpoint for large-scale wall mosaics in the byzantine style used in churches (before being supplanted by fresco) to illustrate the Bible. One such work near Venice, *The Last Judgement* at The Santa Maria Assunta basilica in Torcello, struck Brown strongly when he saw a portion of it reproduced in a book. Processed along with everything else implied by the project, this turgid image of Hell (see right panel, below) became a primary source for the mosaic. Brown painted his own composition onto canvas. His image was then transformed by trained artisans in Stilimbergo, Italy, a centuries-old mosaic fabrication center (also near Venice, as it happens), where Brown had overseen the production of his first project in the medium. The complex scheme of glass tiles matching Brown's lines, shadings and colors was again created to his satisfaction, and the assembled mosaic was sent from Italy on 12 wood panels to the United States to be hoisted and installed at 290 Broadway.



The mosaic creates its own aura in this government building—a kind of noncorporate public space Brown considers a “cathedral for our time”—and like all art, opens itself to multiple levels of meaning and understanding. The upward surge of skulls to humans implies a Torcello-like Armageddon. Multiple identities make up a whole in this work, which resonates with the AIDS quilt. Pondering this mosaic, one might also be reminded, with a profound irony given its siting at the African Burial Ground, of the massive toll of AIDS deaths, which is expected to reach some 70 percent of the world's total, in Africa. Especially when paired with 290 Broadway's other two commissioned artworks—Houston Conwill's monastic floor piece mapping the African diaspora and Clyde Lynd's spiritually uplifting eagle-wing with pinpoint lights—the mosaic opens distinctive doors for contemplation.

Brown's overriding theme is death. Distanced by a culture that often prefers the burlesque of TV violence, horror movies and sound-bites to the real thing, this fact of life deserves, at least occasionally, to be contemplated.

— Sidney Lawrence

Organizer of “Roger Brown” (1987)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

