

Glenn Brown interviewed by David Trigg

PAINTING PAINTINGS



Glenn Brown *Conjuring Numb, Magenta (René/Brown) 2008*

DAVID TRIGG: *YOUR PAINTINGS ARE ALL DERIVED FROM REPRODUCTIONS OF OTHER ARTISTS' WORK. It must be strange seeing your own work reproduced.*

Glenn Brown: That's why it was difficult to decide which paintings should be in the Tate Liverpool exhibition. I only have photographic records of my paintings and some works look great in the photographs but in reality aren't as good as I remember them, and for others it's the exact opposite, so there were a few surprises when I saw the paintings again. The whole printing process is very crude compared to painting, which is very, very precise. It's why as a technology painting is fantastic and nothing comes anywhere near it.

DT: *You once revealed that as a student you would break into the college's painting studios after dark so that you could paint all night.*

GB: I'd have to deny that. And anyway, I'm sure the security is much better in Bath now. When I was at Goldsmiths I had my own studio, so there was no need to break in.

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DT: *It clearly demonstrates how much passion you had for painting – an obsession that is part of your subject matter. Do you still feel the same compulsion?*

GB: I still love painting, it's a fantastic game to play – difficult but enjoyable. Painting is a set of puzzles – you know there are answers but sometimes you just can't find them, then you have to go to other paintings and figure out how other people have solved various problems.

DT: *The first painting you made of another painting was Atom Age Vampire, in 1991, which was copied from a reproduction of Frank Auerbach's 1973 Head of J.Y.M. and rendered his thick impasto brush marks completely flat. Was that made while you were still at Goldsmiths?*

GB: Yes. Most of the paintings in the first room at Tate Liverpool were made when I was at Goldsmiths. That first painting came after a very arduous studio critique; I was making the moonscape and modernist building paintings at the time and people were saying: 'Why are you painting? There's no point, just rephotograph them.' Painting was considered extremely archaic at Goldsmiths in the early 90s but I knew I wanted to paint, I liked the process and its subtlety. Therefore, without changing my work incredibly radically, I tried to answer that problem by making a painting of a painting.

DT: *That work represents an important turning point in your career – why isn't it included in the exhibition?*

GB: There are other paintings made just after that which are very similar and make the same point slightly better. There's a painting called *The Day The World Turned Auerbach* from the same year which has greater detail and the sense of obsession is slightly stronger.

DT: *It is perhaps more resolute whereas the first painting was more of an experiment?*

GB: Yes. The first one is slightly more blurry, it's more Richter-looking whereas *The Day The World Turned Auerbach* has a sharper, more photorealist look to it.

DT: *When you started making paintings of paintings were you aware of Mike Bidlo's project from the 80s, where he made copies of works by Picasso, Warhol and Pollock?*

GB: Yes, absolutely. But Sherrie Levine was more of an influence – at the time I was completely in love with her work. Also artists like Simon Linke with his *Artforum* paintings and even On Kawara; that certain dry, conceptual form of painting is really what I was after.

DT: *There's a room in the Liverpool exhibition that juxtaposes several other paintings derived from Auerbach's Head of J.Y.M. – it's a motif you've returned to many times. What is it about that particular painting that made you want to*

revisit it so frequently?

GB: It's quite a camp image; the pose is very theatrical and the figure has her head turned to one side while still looking at the viewer, so it appears to be quite self-conscious but also very ambiguous. I realised therefore that I could twist the image in various different ways because of its ambiguity; I could make the painting recoil, or come forward and be more aggressive, or I could make it pitiful or grotesque – I knew there was a lot of mileage to be had from that one painting.

DT: *In the same way that the first Auerbach painting signified a new direction in your earlier work, I think St Anthony Returns to the Womb, painted in 2000, perhaps marked the start of another shift in your practice – a move towards a more inventive, freer and fluidic approach, rather than slavishly mimicking existing brush marks.*

GB: *St Anthony Returns to the Womb* is based upon a Georg Baselitz painting – one of his feet paintings from before he started turning them upside down. I think that's when I became more interested in building a figure that was fairly unrecognisable from the original. I made other paintings after Baselitz which also encouraged me to be far more playful – inventing brush marks for instance. Two paintings in the exhibition, *Seventeen Seconds* from 2005 and *International Velvet* from 2004, are both based on the same Baselitz painting but one is turned upside down.



Glenn Brown *The Sound of Music* 1995-2007

DT: *Those works seem to be worlds apart from your earlier paintings. The heads have evolved into these weird, grotesque biomorphs. Do you still think of them as portraits?*

GB: Yes, absolutely, I always see them as portraits.

DT: *Hanging opposite them is The Asylums of Mars, 2006, which is an astonishing work – to quote Clement Greenberg, it has a 'hallucinatory vividness'. It also recalls Dali's double images as well as evoking Arcimboldo's portraits.*

GB: It was meant to be similar to the paintings based on Baselitz, which is why I put them in the same room. It was meant to be a large, ambiguous comic head – it's actually based on a Fragonard painting.

DT: *The central female figure?*

GB: Yes, but then there's an old woman's head looking down and there are other faces and things in there too. It took a long time to complete. To start with, the female figure in the middle was very recognisable, then I got rid of her and you really couldn't see that there was a figure. People would come into the studio and

I'd ask if they could see the figure and they couldn't, even when I pointed it out to them, so I started painting her back in again. It's very difficult to gauge what people are going to see in a painting – sometimes people come into the studio and say, 'oh I like that face there, that's interesting', assuming it was my intention when I've never even seen a face there before.

DT: *I had wondered how much of that was intentional and how much found its way in there subconsciously.*

GB: I think some of it is genuinely subconscious, but I do like to try and make the other small characters within it very ambiguous so you don't quite know whether you're making it up yourself or whether it was my intention.

DT: *In an unusual move you've painted the top right-hand corner green. A similar device is also used in Suffer Well, 2007, where the top left corner is painted black, recalling Sigmar Polke's painting The Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black! of 1969.*

GB: I see those corners as operating slightly differently in each painting. In *Suffer Well* I see it as being like a Russian constructivist sense of depression just about to move into the painting to threaten the figure, as if it could take over the painting. In *The Asylums of Mars* it's more of a comic irritant that you don't really want to look at – it's irritating because every time you look at the figure your eye bounces back to the green triangle. That green isn't anywhere else in the painting. Every time you look at it and then go back to the central figure again you see it in a slightly different way.

DT: *I've noticed something similar appearing in other recent works too, where you've inserted these Baldessari-style coloured discs. Do you intend these to function in a similar way?*

GB: I always think that narrative in painting is most strongly developed by the way your eye moves across the surface, rather than what any particular character is doing. It's about the route your eye takes around a painting. The circles or the green corner are compositional devices to make your eye move in a very particular direction and bounce between different shapes; they make the painting more dynamic and keep you looking at it for longer, as well as simply being very odd visual moments.

DT: *You have also given several of your figures halos and your titles often feature religious references.*

GB: I love art history and a quick wander around the National Gallery will make you aware that Catholicism dominates the history of western art; to ignore its influence would be like saying, I'm going to speak using the



Glenn Brown *Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt)* 9 2008

English language but not use the letter 'a' – it is part of the vocabulary of painting.

DT: *Religious imagery is also used quite explicitly in your recent series of prints, 'Comfortably Numb', 2008, where you've combined Guido Reni's Head of Christ Crowned with Thorns with one of your Auerbach paintings.*

GB: I like Reni's over-the-top sentimentality and the rather ridiculous sense of drama that he imbues all his figures with, especially the Virgin Mary and Christ figures. The lighting and the posing in his paintings are very theatrical and, as I was saying earlier, this particular *Head of J.Y.M.* is also very theatrical – the pose is very Reni. I see a very clear relationship between the posing of the figures and also the use of colour; I think Auerbach's use of colour has become much stronger, especially in the paintings he's making now – it's more acidic and far more late Renaissance. His paintings aren't depictions of reality; his colours aren't realistic – they're far too lurid. It's an artificial world and therefore I think Reni's late Renaissance paintings fit in very well with Auerbach. I wanted to put them together to suggest that they share the same view of the world.

DT: *Auerbach's paintings have also had a significant influence on your sculptures. When did you start making them?*

GB: In 1995; the first one, *These Days*, is in the Liverpool show. To me they are fundamentally paintings, it's just that they are paintings on three-dimensional surfaces.

DT: *These Days is the one sitting on the floor?*

GB: Yes, the intention was to put them all on the floor. The initial ones were based on Auerbach paintings and they were meant to be like abject heads. I still think they are very abject looking objects, sort of dirty and grotesque. To me they are head-like in the way that Brancusi sculptures can be head-like, and also like the moment in the film *Eraserhead* when the character's head suddenly drops to the floor, or perhaps a pile of guillotined heads.

DT: *Why did you start putting them into vitrines?*

GB: Well, when I first showed them in an exhibition at Karsten Schubert people kept kicking them.

DT: *Tripping over them?*

GB: No, intentionally kicking them. At the private view someone kicked one right across the

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room. That was interesting because I realised that this notion of the abject worked so well that somebody actually felt that all they wanted to do was kick it. As they became more intricate I realised that I just couldn't put them on the floor because they'd become so dirty and dusty that they'd only last for a few days – that's why I started to put them onto tables. But I quickly realised that people then wanted to poke them and try to break bits off. It became virtually impossible to show them without the perspex covers on.

DT: *There is something about the vitrines that makes the sculptures become more like museum artefacts.*

GB: I could have vitrines that are far more beautiful and overbearing. For instance, Sherrie Levine's vitrines are clearly part of the work and they're far more museum-like with their little brass fittings and nicely finished wooden corners. I don't want my cases to be too obvious and articulated so I've kept them relatively light and simple – I want the sculpture to dominate, so the case is just a frame to hold the work.

DT: *Although your paintings have evolved enormously in recent years, the sculptures have developed more slowly and continue to reference back to Auerbach.*

GB: It's partially because I've made so few of them; I think on average I make one every two years. They borrow a very particular language from Auerbach in that he just uses one size of brush to make his paintings. My sculptures are always painted with the same size of brush; the size varies from sculpture to sculpture but it keeps a certain uniformity to it – that's the kind of thing I think I should be playing with more. I haven't developed the language of them very much and ideally there should be as much difference within them as there is in the paintings.

DT: *The Sound of Music, begun in 1995, is a very uncharacteristic sculpture. I'm assuming this paint-encrusted table started life as a piece of studio equipment?*

GB: No, it was always meant to be a sculpture. It started with photographs I'd seen of Auerbach's studio – everything was absolutely covered in paint and his palette spread across the entire table with the paint slowly building up. Also I visited an open studio once where somebody had this table in the middle of the room that they used to mix paint on. It was so encrusted with paint – it was an absolutely beautiful object. So that's why I started making that work. I worked on it for years and years, although for about five years of its life I gave up on the idea of

it being a sculpture and it just became a table that I used to mix the paint for the other sculptures on. It was only later that I actually thought I would make it into a sculpture again.

DT: *The paint is like a fungus colonising the table.*

GB: I never could decide if it was finished – it did seem to be like this organic thing. When it was first shown it was in a vitrine but that killed it because it was too high. In Liverpool we could just use a barrier.

DT: *But you've kept it on a plinth.*

GB: The plinth was only made a couple of days before the opening. Initially I wanted it sitting on the floor but it just didn't look right. Had it been a wooden floor or even concrete I would have put it on the floor, but because it's a painted floor there was a relationship between the paint, the table and the floor, which I didn't like so I put it on a base.

DT: *For your current exhibition at Karsten Schubert you've produced a new series of etchings that superimpose reproductions of etchings by Rembrandt, Urs Graf and Lucian Freud. These pitchy amalgams are strikingly different from your other work.*

GB: I wanted them to be monstrous. Again, I see them as portraits and I wanted them to be like the Auerbach or Baselitz paintings. I wanted to create these ambiguous images, something that was between states of mind, and one of the best ways of doing that was to combine different elements together to get a schizophrenic portrait. We all have multiple personalities and we can shift from one mindset to another very easily. They're meant, in some sense, to be poetic representations of the human psyche.

DT: *That notion is particularly evident in some of the layered Rembrandt images, where you can see a double head, for instance – other prints, however, are almost entirely black.*

GB: I think the highest number of images laid on top of each other in a single print is 16, so it gets pretty black. It represents that depressive point at which you can't stop thinking about things, where there's too much information flooding into your head and it just turns into this black oppressive darkness.

DT: *Existential angst?*

GB: Absolutely – things being too real and too present. That's why a lot of the etching plates were overly inked up, to make them very dark and foreboding. The whole image is starting to decay and degenerate from being overly reproduced.

DT: *What drew you to those particular artists?*

GB: Rembrandt obsessively drew and painted self-portraits and whenever he painted somebody else they also ended up looking just like him – it's like everything he did was a self-portrait. Freud is one of the more famous contemporary artists who makes etchings. There are certain compositional devices that he repeats, so when you overlay them you get the idea of a single coherent character being formed; they still feel like Freud and that essence doesn't go away, no matter how many layers you put on top of each other.

DT: *And what about Graf?*

GB: When you see a Graf etching everything is distorted and over the top – there's something depressive about them. Everything is just filled with this squirming, overly detailed decay, which is what I like in my paintings too – this sense of everything decaying, killed off – and I wanted to emphasise that, by layering them to the point where they're unrecognisable. It's that sense of putrefaction, although when you start to putrefy you do not become any less complex.

DT: *You lose form.*

GB: You lose form but you start to turn into something else. You don't just disappear, you migrate into maggots and bacteria and move into a different world.

DT: *These notions of decay and the grotesque seem to be important themes.*

GB: We are obsessed with the grotesque and things that we find fundamentally debasing and uncomfortable – you find it in Graf and you find it in painters like Jean Dubuffet and Willem De Kooning as well. With De Kooning you always feel like you shouldn't be seeing these paintings, they're embarrassing and you don't know whether he was in his right mind when he painted them. There is a certain point at which paintings do become enlivened with a sense of embarrassment because they are overly intense, overly emotional or just slightly wrong in a way that becomes very intriguing. You want to stare at them like you want to stare at a car crash – you can't not look. That same feeling is there within great art as well – a strangeness that makes you want to stare. ■

Glenn Brown continues at Tate Liverpool until May 10. Glenn Brown: Etchings (Portraits) continues at Karsten Schubert, London until May 8.

DAVID TRIGG is a writer and critic based in Bristol.