

## Art in America

MAGAZINE APR. 03, 2009

### Interview: Glenn Brown

by Lynn MacRitchie

Find this article online:  
[www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/interview-glenn-brown/](http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/interview-glenn-brown/)

*Christina of Denmark*, 2008, oil on panel, 65 by 467/8 inches. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Gagosian Gallery.



The painter Glenn Brown keeps good company. His London studio is in Rochelle School, Shoreditch, built in 1895 and now chicly refurbished, housing a fashionable restaurant, studios and spaces for artists, publishers, and fashion and graphic designers. The school, founded to educate the children of London's first model housing complex, whose red brick apartment blocks still surround it, now forms the hub of an East End art scene, which has come a long way from the freezing studios in abandoned factories and shabby galleries in run-down shops that its pioneers, Brown's friends and contemporaries, first staked out in the early 1990s.

Entrance is through a door in the perimeter wall of the schoolyard, and as I press the bell labeled "Brown," I notice that names on the other bells include former Turner Prize contenders Michael Raedecker and Goshka Macuga. As I wait for a response, Mark Wallinger, a Turner runner-up in 1995 and the winner in 2007, emerges from a car parked just behind me. He, too, is making a studio visit, although not to his old friend Glenn. When we eventually gain admittance, he guides me through the building and directs me to Brown's anonymous white door.

Inside, the high-windowed studio is quiet and businesslike. Shelves crowded with exhibition catalogues and art-history books line the wall behind a long work table, where two big computer screens rise up out of a jumble of sketches, photocopies and cutout shapes like paper dolls ready to be played

PRINT

with. In front of the table, two armchairs side by side face the opposite wall. As Brown and I sit down to talk, we can see several of his paintings and sculptures. Some of the paintings are new and some have already been exhibited. If a painting is in the studio, Brown tells me later, he may choose to continue to work on it, even if it has already been shown.

Born in 1966 and trained at Norwich School of Art, Bath College and Goldsmiths College, Brown was one of the original Young British Artists and has been at the heart of the British art scene for some 20 years. His painter contemporaries include Gary Hume, Chris Ofili and Peter Doig, who, like him, have built successful international careers. All have developed distinctive, individual styles, but Brown is unique in that all of his paintings (and the photographs, prints and sculptures that he produces) are based on the work of other artists, which he transposes from reproductions. His technical skill is legendary—he can render the surface of paint on canvas as flat and smooth as a glossy magazine page. In the process, however, the original images—of Auerbach heads, Fragonard beauties, Dalí nudes or Chris Foss fantasy landscapes, to name just some of his better-known sources—are put through manipulations and distortions that take them very far indeed from their starting points. As reworked by Brown, these familiar images become something else entirely, a powerful, highly personal running commentary on painting in the 21st century.

My first long conversation with Brown took place at Heathrow Airport, when the plane that he, his fellow artist Richard Wentworth and I were due to travel on to São Paulo for the 2002 Bienal was delayed for six hours. With two such companions, the lengthy wait was an opportunity for much convivial conversation, but the topic of art was barely touched on. Now, however, on the eve of a major retrospective that opened at Tate Liverpool in February 2009, it was time for some serious talk about the extraordinary paintings that have made Brown one of the most respected artists of his generation.

**Lynn MacRitchie** Thank you for inviting me to the studio. I think it's important to do the interview with some of your pictures around. Two crucial aspects of your work are your subject matter and technique, and I wanted to remind myself about how the paintings looked in person after having seen so many photographs of them while doing research for the interview.

**Glenn Brown** The paintings do not photograph terribly well, which is the point, really, because they have such flat, precise and sheer surfaces. You really need to see that. In reproduction the precision of the color and the glazing goes off.

**LM** Is this new work?

**GB** They are not all finished—some of them have been on the go for over a year.

**LM** How long do they take?

**GB** If a painting is on the wall it's open to being painted! This [*indicating*

*Burlesque, 2008, a still life painting of apples*] has been out of the studio twice now and come back. Every time it comes back I change it, even though it's going to be in the Tate show and has already been photographed.

**LM** Part of the power of your work is that you are directly addressing the problem of painting. It seems to me that one of the huge challenges for artists now is what to do—what subject can you possibly have?

**GB** That always felt very much an issue when I was at college. What you paint, how you paint, painting is dead, this is the last dying throes of painting. And I really no longer think that. I've tried other things—I've tried using photography, and I do use computers and forms of image-making other than painting. The computer is probably the best example of something that is there to challenge painting. But the whole process of printing is so bad, so lumbering and awful, that it can't compare to the precise technology of painting, where what you put on the surface is what you actually see. You can get gradations of color that are far more complex than anything printing can achieve. So the immediacy and impact that painting can have compared with other forms of technology just blows them away, I think.

Therefore, the whole thing of should I paint or not, is painting dead—of course it's not. Nothing has yet come about that can compare with it as a translation of that human desire to make marks, to make two-dimensional images of things or two-dimensional surfaces with color and shape. I love computer technology; I love Photoshop and all of the possibilities of manipulation that it gives you to play with. But the final product from the computer is always very lackluster. Not that I would ever do without it.

The work wasn't always about the brush marks, but they have developed as a fascination of mine. I suppose it is born of my desire to be the sort of painter that is able to manipulate those bravura, quick, elegant and speedy brush marks. I want to be Soutine, I want to be de Kooning, slashing away at the canvas; but that's just not me. I can't do it that quickly, and it doesn't look good. And also I have a kind of healthy cynicism about what it is to look at the world, to be in a modern world surrounded by images.

**LM** It's not just the slashing and dashing around with the brushstrokes, is it? It's also about the relationship to the subject. If you had been Soutine, you'd have been in the studio with a side of beef rotting away, and you'd be painting what it looked like. You'd have been in a direct relationship to the subject.

**GB** But Soutine was also in there with the history of an awful lot of other artists. He had the knowledge of Cézanne and the Impressionists, van Gogh and all those artists to back him up, to suggest what he could and couldn't do, what works and what doesn't work. He also had the notion of the avant-garde to push him into doing things that might not necessarily work. The point was more to try than to succeed.

**LM** You certainly have succeeded, in terms of public recognition of your work. Your biography is very impressive—constantly exhibiting, show after

show, year after year, all over the world, an extraordinary amount of hard work.

**GB** I get a real kick out of painting. There are not many other things that can give you that long-term satisfaction, that “my life is worth something” sort of feeling. It’s intellectually stimulating: the problem-solving aspect of “How can I continue to make things better?” At the end of the day I always feel that I’m short of what I wanted to achieve. The paintings are a struggle to try to get to work. To some extent they often fall slightly short of my aspirations. That’s what keeps you going. You start on the next one because you always feel that you might get closer to this goal of the ideal painting. Sometimes you see it. Or you see other art that inspires you and you come back to the studio and think, “Oh, my work is so dull,” so you try and improve.

**LM** There’s a group of painters from what used to be called the YBAs (Young British Artists)—you, Chris Ofili, Gary Hume, Peter Doig—who’ve become established. It seems to me that your work is very different from theirs.

**GB** I think we’re all quite different from each other. It’s a bit difficult to say that it’s a group, really.

**LM** I meant that you were contemporaries rather than any kind of organized group.

**GB** It’s an interesting point because in many ways it would be nice if there was a group, if a style had developed that was YBA painting. It would be nice if there was a group discussion and everybody had moved things on in a group way, like Cubism, Impressionism, Expressionism or even Neo-Expressionism. But I don’t think that the YBA thing was ever about that group sense of itself, of trying to answer a question together. I think it was more about competition, people spurring each other on in a competitive way, which is also good.

**LM** Each of the YBA painters found a way to develop, which can be very difficult for artists. You make a start, go to art school, then you go out into the world, get one or two shows. But to keep going can be hard. What I get from your work is the sense that you’re really digging in, really delving into what painting is and what painting could be. You take things to a deep level of exploration. I get the sense that you are very settled, very secure in your purpose.

**GB** That’s interesting! *[laughs]* If you say someone is very settled and secure as an artist that sounds very bad. It means that you are no longer questioning and pushing things forward. But, as I said, maybe that avant-garde notion that you have to continually hit your head against what’s new and what’s rebellious no longer really exists. Hopefully, now it’s about what is good painting and intriguing image-making rather than just what’s new or what hasn’t been seen before. I think the whole rush to “what’s new” has been interesting but in retrospect the results look a bit dull. If you look back at the history of 20th-century painting, some of what were thought to be high points at the time aren’t so high any longer. For instance, I would say that Mark Rothko’s late

# Galerie Max Hetzler

Art in America

MacRitchie, Lynn: Interview: Glenn Brown

03.04.2009

work isn't a high point. It was avant-garde and new at the time, but it looks rather dull and uninspiring now.

**LM** The number of artists whose works you have used is quite limited, a small group so far. Why did you choose those particular artists?

**GB** The group may be bigger than you think. I'm now using artists that I've never used before. This is from Delacroix [*indicating a nude*]. I've never used Delacroix before. This is based on Courbet [*indicating Burlesque*]. I've never used Courbet before. This is Guido Reni [*indicating a portrait*]. I've never used Reni before. And that's Adolf Menzel [*indicating a painting leaning against the wall*].

**LM** Your paintings seem to operate in different ways depending on the paintings they are based on. For example, I'm intrigued by your recent work based on Baselitz's paintings of feet. It seems to me that in them you have gone a long way in exploring paintings as just stuff, lumps of stuff.

**GB** I always refer to them as my abstract paintings. The abstracts are not really abstracts, though. In fact, there are things going on in there, but often it won't be obvious what you're looking at. There may be multiple heads in there, for example. I used to use a lot of Auerbach, Baselitz and Fragonard; I was trying to restrict the subjects and I would sometimes make two or three or even four paintings all based on the same Baselitz or Fragonard painting, just to play a game with how many times you could repeat something in different ways. But lately that's changed and now I tend to use a wider range of artists. Lately, there's also been a slight push toward the more abstracted paintings. In every show I include two or three paintings that are very figurative, more kitsch, and I suppose more direct or recognizable. They are there almost to counteract the abstraction in the other work.

**LM** Are you actually bringing extra images into them? Some have little flowers painted on the surface and some have eyes.

**GB** For a long time I've used the computer to manipulate images before I start painting, so I do lots of drawings and then computer manipulation to stretch and pull things around. When I actually start painting them on the canvas I play around. If I'm painting in the studio, most of the time I don't have the image of what the painting is based on. I'm just free-forming with what works. I will often bring in other paintings for color references or bring in elements like the flowers, or change the brush marks.

**LM** Other artists have remade work from the past, such as Picasso painting Velázquez's *Las Meninas* over and over again. I've always thought of it as his way of trying to learn from that painting. And there was Francis Bacon, also with Velázquez, in his case altering the content of the original portrait of the Pope. I don't think either of those examples is close to what you do. Would

you comment on that?

**GB** When I use Soutine do I feel that I know Soutine better? No, I don't. There is quite a lot of Soutine in my painting but that is not the actual subject. The real subject is me trying to make an abstract portrait or a self-portrait. I take a lump of meat from Soutine to make a portrait of myself.

**LM** That's my impression—whatever you were doing, it was not in any way like Picasso analyzing Velázquez or Bacon making the Pope scream.

**GB** I think Bacon, like me, is far more interested in the reproduced image, which is why I have never used Bacon's work in my own painting. This is one of the latest paintings I made [*Nausea, 2008, based on a Velázquez Pope, but turned upside down and without a head*]. This was me saying that if I want to appropriate a painting I need to appropriate the most famous painting. I was trying to come up with a version of the *Mona Lisa*, but I couldn't get the *Mona Lisa* to work. I was trying to figure out a way to use the Velázquez to make it my own. By taking away the head and turning it upside down, it's not about the Pope any longer. And also it's not about the Francis Bacon painting, because by taking away the head, the thing that made the Francis Bacon painting great isn't there anymore.

**LM** Your paintings tend either to be composed over the full space of the canvas or to have a highly worked central image against a plain background.

**GB** I was reading an interview with Maria Lassnig and she was asked why she didn't paint anything on the background, which was just bare canvas. She said, "I'm not interested in the background, I'm interested in the figure, in trying to depict the human being. Why would I put anything in the background that is going to take attention away from the figure?" I think with an artist like Picasso, the background was just a foil for the figure. He never really painted landscapes: it's all about the figure. I think I have a similar concern and that is why the backgrounds are one color, to offset the figure.

To that extent, they are quite formal and traditional portraits. They are abstracted portraits but not abstract in the way that Barnett Newman was trying to make the painting allover. It's about a central image, even if the central image feels as if it's falling to the right or to the left of the canvas. When I'm working out the initial composition, I often shift the image over to one side to give it an awkward feeling. I do pencil drawings, and I use a sketchbook. Sometimes if I'm in a museum I do little drawings for compositional reference. The ideas usually come when I'm looking at an actual painting rather than at a book. And then I'll look through books to find paintings that will fulfill my idea of what the painting should be.

**LM** What's the trigger?

**GB** It's not the subject, but the shape, the way the brush marks work. For instance, a painting like *Deep Throat [2007]*, while referencing Soutine, was drawn from a Dubuffet painting. For another work, I hunted through the old favorites such as Auerbach and Baselitz, trying to find an image, and couldn't

find anything. Then I looked at Soutine and realized that within this clump of green trees there was the head that I wanted to find. I worked out the composition before I knew it would be a Soutine painting. And it was only after I had started the painting that I understood what the color would be. The background was painted several times before it ended up this green color.

**LM** It's actually a very intuitive process, isn't it? As you said in your Turner Prize statement, you work from "the contemporary landscape." But your landscape is all of the history of art, within which you move around and make your sketches.

**GB** My field is the library; that's where I go sketching.

**LM** One of the questions that springs to mind when considering an artist making work based on the work of other artists is development. You're about to have a retrospective spanning 16 years. I can see ways in which your painting has changed, but I wonder what sense you have of your work's development?

**GB** I don't worry so much about it developing, more about it getting better. If I felt that the work had the appearance of some of the older paintings but was just a much-improved, more dynamic and interesting version, then I would be happy that I had got somewhere. This painting in front of us, for example [*not photographed and still untitled*], is based on an Auerbach, which I haven't used for the past five years, maybe longer. It was a very conscious decision to go back to old ground. I want to reinvigorate some old ideas that I can improve on this time. I can make the color better, the composition more intriguing—even though to some extent it reminds me of a lot of work I made 15 years ago.

I like to be able to jump around and re-quote my old work, and not continually feel as if I were moving forward to this "promised land." The Tate exhibition will not be hung chronologically. There will be paintings done 18 years apart in the same room, but hopefully they'll have some playful information to exchange. There isn't necessarily an overall stylistic development, more an increase in quality. The work I make now doesn't look like the work I made 10 years ago, but there are similarities.

**LM** I think something is shifting. For example, let's take your early choices of artists to work with, Salvador Dalí or sci-fi illustrator Chris Foss. These are the classic, teenage boys' favorite paintings. There's a kind of weird, queasy eroticism in those images, it seems to me. In Dalí, of course, there's a huge erotic element, and I've always found the science fiction images erotic in a strange way. Now, in your more recent works, a sort of fleshiness seems to be actually manifesting itself, especially in the pieces you refer to as your "abstract" paintings.

**GB** Obviously with the works based on Dalí and the earlier ones based on Auerbach, there's something directly erotic, and also with Foss, who, incidentally, illustrated *The Joy of Sex*. [*A sex education manual written by*

*Alex Comfort, The Joy of Sex (1972) was illustrated with line drawings of a heterosexual couple by Foss. The images in the first edition have gained a reputation as classics of '70s kitsch.]*

All of these earlier paintings were far more direct copies of the source material; there was less of me in them. As I said, with the more recent paintings there's generally a much greater adaptation of the source material, which I abandon quickly and just carry on with the painting. It's often difficult to recognize what they were based on because so much of the original has been changed, or tiny parts of a particular painting have been used and then altered very dramatically. But whether that makes the painting more me or not, I'm not sure—because I love the notion of appropriation, and the fact that we can't escape appropriation. All of the knowledge of all of the art we've ever seen is with us when we paint, or when I paint. Whether I choose to or not, I may appropriate artists' styles and marks and color combinations.

Fleshy is a good word to use because these paintings are very much about the discrepancy between the brush mark and flesh, and often the relationship between living and dead flesh as well. A lot of the colors are quite repellent, and the rather tormented, irritating surface has a degree of unpleasantness about it. I suppose that's my gothic, adolescent self still there, peering through Foss and Dalí! Even when I paint flowers, they always come out rather unpleasant and smelly looking.

**LM** The vase-of-flowers paintings are particularly good examples of what we are discussing, this fleshiness. There has always been something very powerful and disturbing in the way you paint. I was struck by it when I first saw your work in the show curated by Rear Window [*a London-based arts organization that operated between 1992 and 1998*], in Richard Salmon's studio in 1994. For me, it's becoming more manifest now, for example, in the vase-of-flowers paintings, which are much more about the physicality of the actual performance of painting, if I could describe it like that.

**GB** The painting *On Hearing of the Death of My Mother* [2002], which is based on a Renoir vase of flowers, was painted at the same time as a work called *Kill Yourself*, based on the same Renoir. They were trying to be as deeply unpleasant as I could make them, and I don't know why! I wasn't fantastically unhappy at the time, I have to say. Art is theater and theater isn't real life—it's an exaggeration of real life; it's what makes people engage with something. You don't go to the opera because you want to see a supermarket; you go because you want to see grand themes played out, at a grand emotional level, heightened emotions, and that operatic sense is what I want in the work. The emotional level has gone up to near maximum.

**LM** And to use the word you used earlier, "appropriation," I think that in your early days you kind of appropriated that theatricality, that operatic quality, from people like Chris Foss, or John Martin—surely the master of operatic painting. But now that desire to create a sort of spectacle, a sort of grandeur, seems to me to be coming from inside the paintings instead of being copied



from outside, if that makes sense.

**GB** I think that does some of the early paintings a slight injustice, in that the Foss paintings never look like my versions of them. Mine are always played around with. The colors are altered, the cities were redrawn and I was always inventing things to increase their intensity right from the start. Even 16 years ago I was playing with the images to increase that sense of the gothic. It was partially there in Chris Foss's work, but not in quite the same way. All the while I was sort of learning what you can do, learning different techniques from other people. But I never want to lose that notion of appropriation—people say to me, sooner or later you'll stop copying other artists and you'll make work of your own, but it's never been my point to try to do that, because I never thought you ever could. The work is always going to be based on something, and I wanted to make the relationship with art history as obvious as possible. Again, I think it increases the intensity of the way that people look at things.

**LM** It also gives you permission to make paintings.

**GB** And it allows you to be more outrageous as well. If you present these paintings to people who've never looked at painting before, they might be rather puzzled. But to somebody who is acquainted with the National Gallery and all of the strange, dark and peculiar ways in which artists have chosen to represent the world, my paintings don't appear as so much of a surprise. You can find all of the brooding adolescent angst in a Rubens painting that you can find in any modern teenager's bedroom—it's an enduring theme. And the sexuality is probably more rampant in painting of the past than in today's painting.

**LM** It's true in historic paintings because sexuality, or horror, is always presented within the context of a familiar story. You can show Judith cutting Holofernes's head off or whatever because it's a story that the audience would know, and we don't have those sorts of commonly recognized stories any longer. Artists have to make up their own stories: it's another layer of the job an artist has to do in the 21st century, and it's a very difficult thing to do. Whereas before, the king would say to Titian, "Paint me a picture of Diana and Actaeon."

**GB** The Renaissance was an extraordinary time, because the Catholic Church was commissioning paintings of these pagan acts that were quite outrageous and very anti-Christian in many ways.

**LM** It was like history painting in the 18th century—these subjects were considered to be serious and appropriate as themes for artists to address. In a sense you do history painting: you do history-of-art-history painting.

**GB** Which is a much smaller kind of history. I'm thinking of walking around Versailles looking at the huge history-based paintings there—the Delacroix, the Davids—they are actually quite dull. Whereas the depiction of myth and legend can be quite exciting. It's not the real world and it may be less politically correct, but it makes for a better story!

# Galerie Max Hetzler

Art in America

MacRitchie, Lynn: Interview: Glenn Brown

03.04.2009

**LM** You seem to be quite open about wanting there to be some kind of human connection, an emotional response to your work. One painting, for example, is titled *I do not feel embarrassed at attempting to express sadness and loneliness*. It's another vase-of-flowers painting.

**GB** Yes, that's based on a van Gogh.

**LM** I'm assuming the title is your statement and not a quote from something—or is it?

**GB** I think it's almost certainly a quote, though I've forgotten where it's from!

**LM** I'm also assuming that you mean it, even though you're quoting someone else.

**GB** That's it—the titles are often trying to be embarrassingly direct, and vulgar in their directness. I don't think that the painting is less direct, but I don't want the paintings to be illustrative.

**LM** I think the paintings are direct, because you have such command of your medium. I'm not even talking about whatever it is you do to make the surfaces so smooth. In a way I'm more interested in all the work you've done with the paint before you get to that stage—you torture it! You really are an abstract expressionist, because you've actually done all that work with the paint before you seal it away behind the flat surface. That's why the viewer's response to the paintings is an emotional response, and a direct response. In fact, you are doing a forbidden thing, something many artists don't do anymore—elicit a direct response—because it's considered rather embarrassing. I think you are acknowledging that in a way that a lot of artists now shy away from.

**GB** To a large extent I think that as time has gone on I have detached myself from contemporary art. I still look at a lot of contemporary art, but I am far more drawn to the previous 500 years of painting's history. It seems very short-term just to look at the history of the past few years when there's this much longer history to draw on. I don't really believe in cultural evolution or a cultural progression. I think we just move around on a surface of intellectual debate. The way that Guido Reni described the human condition, which was rather kitsch and overwrought in many ways, informs me more than much contemporary painting ever could. And it is that degree of theatricality, which I like, which has been abandoned in a lot of contemporary art. I grew up looking at artists like Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Richard Prince, and more conceptual art—which, especially with an artist like Richter, is very much about emotional detachment, the cool gaze of the detached artist. You never quite know what they're thinking. And it's about the way technology has detached us from the direct relationship with the real world. I think Richter is continually traumatized by the lack of religion. He can no longer make work which is passionate because he doesn't have religion to fall back on as his

subject. I think Richter feels that he has lost something. I don't feel that I ever lost religion. Christianity has informed all of my work, because the history of art is so dominated by the Catholic Church. I owe so much to the Catholic Church and how it has affected my development as an artist—you can't ignore Catholicism. You can disagree with it, you can hate it, but you can't ignore it. Images of Christ are continually coming back into my work and religious themes are there for their narrative component—they add a spice, they enable you to say things. The story of Christ enables you to say things about humanity—that's the whole point of it.

**LM** I presume the sculptures that you make are another kind of manifestation of your relationship with paint?

**GB** To me they are very much the same thing as the paintings and they have continued to inform each other. I don't know whether I'd be making the more abstracted paintings if I hadn't made the sculptures. I have always had this liking for Baselitz, Dubuffet, Asger Jorn, Wols and Jean Fautrier. Theirs is a childish way of depicting people—it's stupid, it's overly simplified, but somehow it tries by its childish irreverence to get to the very heart of what it is to be a human. And that's very much what the abstracted heads are about. The sculptures are very much a manifestation that Art Brut sense of depicting figures. Even if it's not obvious to everybody else, I always think of the heads as being characters, as having emotions.

I have a very similar way of making the sculptures and the paintings. The application of color, the mark-making, the drawing, the way that lines interact with each other and try to guide your eye over the sculpture's surface is, I think, pretty similar to the paintings. The only difference is that as you walk around them you have to engage with them as a slightly different composition. The paintings and sculptures really inform each other—it's a way of making a three-dimensional painting.

**LM** The wild brushstrokes made manifest—they've come off the canvas and they're standing there in the room!

**GB** I wouldn't have come up with the sculptures if it hadn't been for Auerbach. In his work it seems so obvious, especially in the early work, that he was trying to make a sculpture. He was trying to get the paint so thick that it seemed to walk off the canvas. And my sculptures still bear a lot of Auerbach's mark-making—the way he only uses one size of brush for the whole painting, for example—which gives them uniformity. Their lumpen, abject sense is quite Auerbach as well. I think that maybe with the next lot of sculptures hopefully I'll move slightly away from that Auerbach feeling.

**LM** One of your most recent paintings is like a head, but it also seems to be made from foliage, from green leaves.

**GB** *Deep Throat* [2007]. It started out as a group of trees taken from a Soutine painting. I wanted them to be like the myth of the Green Man, the natural spirit of nature, but also with the unpleasant aspect of the darker side of nature.

Again it's a pagan myth which would seem to be at odds with 20th-century urban life. But I also live in the countryside so I see nothing wrong with bringing some more country themes into the work. The idea is that this head forms out of the trees, but it has this abstracted Art Brut feel to it. It's a good example of a painting that appears to be a painting of a sculpture but a sculpture made of brush marks. In essence that's what a lot of the paintings do look like. That's what I want them to look like—as if the entire world was made of paint, every person in the world was made of paint, which is a metaphor for everything in the world being made of other people's ideas. You can't look at anything without the knowledge that other people have looked at it and thought about it. We are made of other people's opinions whether we like it or not, because we are surrounded by language. That's what language is—a sharing of ideas that allows us to make up what seem like our own ideas but are in fact just an accumulation of other peoples' thoughts. The only free will we have is to decide which ideas to agree or disagree with. We exist within language; we can't escape it.

**LM** And that's what art is—we're sitting here having this conversation because you made a painting: we illustrate your point perfectly. Had you not made a painting, you and I, and you and your global audience, would not be in the dialogue which we obviously are in.

**GB** We could also have this conversation because you have a knowledge of a lot of the paintings.

**LM** But presumably people can relate to your paintings who don't have this knowledge. What are the responses to your work from people who don't know art history? What do they respond to?

**GB** I think I get a proper response from people who don't know that's based on a Courbet painting [*indicating Burlesque*]. They don't feel that it's a game, therefore they don't know that they're meant to know the painting it's based on. They don't feel belittled; therefore they just engage with it as a painting of some apples. They wonder why it's painted in such a way, and develop ideas about what it means in a far more healthy, direct and emotional way. My father doesn't know much about art history, and I like his engagement with my paintings. He tells me if he doesn't like something. He doesn't try to be polite. So he, without any knowledge of Courbet, of what the painting might have meant to Courbet, will develop his own thinking, which is what I'm trying to get at. I want people to think of them [the apples] as a reclining nude, to walk around the landscape, to look at the rather repellent green color, to wonder whether it's sunset or sunrise and why this strange, greenish-white yellow light is coming down from nowhere and shining on this little event which is happening. That's what I want them to think about. Courbet is just a starting point, the incidental object.

**LM** How do you feel about having a retrospective? Are you pleased? Are you terrified? It's a big thing.

**GB** You'll have to ask me that when I'm there! I sort of did it at the Serpentine

*[Solo exhibition, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2004], so I have had that experience before. A lot of paintings I won't have seen for quite some time, not since I painted them. It's always interesting to see whether you still like them or not. The paintings that I was making 10 or 15 years ago do physically look quite different from the paintings I make now. The attention to detail and the precision of the early work astounds me. I sometimes look at them and ask, how on earth did I paint that? They look as if they had been painted with one hair on a brush.*

**LM** You do it all yourself, don't you—you don't have assistants?

**GB** No, I couldn't stand having assistants. The more recent paintings are much looser in the way they are painted, but then again they are much bigger. The early paintings were much smaller. They look like miniatures in their sense of detail. If I were to give that same sense of minuscule detail in these recent paintings they would never get finished. I play around with the more recent paintings, re-layer them, in a way that I didn't with the earlier paintings. If I tried to make them as precise as the earlier paintings that couldn't be done. So in spite of the fact that I said I don't want any sense of progression, there is a difference between the early works, which are slightly cooler, more analytical, more conceptual than the more recent paintings. I don't think it's necessarily a good thing for them to become less conceptual. There are certain elements to the earlier conceptual things that I prefer. But I am certainly less content with the paintings than I was. That's why they are far more changed and altered; they are labored over now more than I used to because my sense of dissatisfaction is higher. My critical levels are much higher. I know more than before and therefore I find it more difficult to satisfy myself. Being a painter you always look at the way other painters have developed. A lot of painters in their 20s and 30s can be very vibrant and exciting, and then they lose that energy. But with other artists exactly the opposite happens, as they get older they get more energetic and more complex and richer in the way they look at the work. It makes the work more exciting. And you want to be one of those latter artists.

*"Glenn Brown," curated by Laurence Sillars and Francesco Bonami, is on view at Tate Liverpool [Feb. 20-May 10], and will travel to Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin [May 28-Oct. 4]. An exhibition of new works by Brown appears at Gagosian Gallery London in October.*

*Lynn MacRitchie is an artist and writer based in London.*