

# frieze

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## Confessions of a Body Snatcher

Glenn Brown

Glenn Brown remakes and retitles other people's paintings, either whole or in part. Though this practice might be thought to assume study and some degree of respect he works from photographs and admits that in the case of at least one of his chosen artists he has never seen the paintings he has reproduced. But perhaps the term should be 'produced', since one '80s tendency was to reconsider art as an act of work. (Consider a Sherrie Levine watercolour or a Bridget Riley by Philip Taaffe.)

Brown's self-appointed task involves an attempt to return discussion to questions of manual labour. Painting laboriously, by night, he uses a secret method designed both to reward and chastise traditional expectations of authorship. What would otherwise be an impasto surface has become sheer, impacted, opaque, sinister and involuted. Directed inwards not out, the paintings seem to rebuff one's gaze, achieving a resilience of their own. It is as if, now that they are translated they will no longer be the way they were. But to say this is either misleading or irrelevant. The reason Brown sets so little store by the 'genuine article' may be that for him only truth lies in the eye of the beholder. The problem is that *his* eye is looking at photography rather than actuality. And what better historical period to choose in order to mount a critique of matter, than the '50s, when 'genuine' emotion was equated with thick paint, as if feeling were magically imbricated with clots of pigment?

Brown once made paintings of magnified photographs of the moon's surface. The craters in those works resembled distant relatives of paintstrokes, rendered in superrealist style. Perhaps they reminded him of the covers of '50s science fiction magazines. Throughout this century and before, science fiction has presented a popular, sensationalised account of possible futures. And as the titles of Brown's painted versions of Ben Nicholson constructions reveal, he too sensed connections between art and the future, whether utopian, like Nicholson's, or not. Could his critique of materiality paraded for its own sake have to do with its retrograde dependence on matter? Or is the word 'materiality'? Or even 'materialism'?

Two highly priced artists in particular attracted his attention: Frank Auerbach and Karel Appel, who both matured in a

period when painters registered time - no time at all in Appel's case, all the time in the world in Auerbach's - by means of thick paint and its sensitive registration of the happy accident. Brown's choice was not based on admiration for their art. ('Third rate van Gogh', he calls Auerbach, while Appel is dismissed as 'consciously mock-naive'.) His revisions of their work emphasise both the pretensions involved in their attempt to unlearn, and the folly of their faith in 'direct' expression. Informed, perhaps, by his own reaction against expansive '80s paintwork, Brown's argument seems to be that Appel and Auerbach, themselves only representatives of one approach to painting, are no more than sanctified yobs who scrawl their own equivalents of smiley faces again and again and are even congratulated for it. In some corners of the British art establishment, where an eyebrow raised in reaction to Auerbach is regarded as a near criminal act, even the juxtaposition of his work and Appel's would be deemed heretical. Despite this, if Brown were a critic he would not mince words. For him, daft, culturally sanctioned gesturalism is an Augean stable and he the Hercules whose duty it is to disinfect it. At this time, for example, he mounted an attack on the ultimate in post-war expressionism. Unfortunately, his version of a chimpanzee painting remains unfinished.

Disordered, diseased, the faces that confront us from Glenn Brown's Auerbachs and Appels are accompanied by titles deriving from that widespread phenomenon of the Cold War years: fear of invasion, a long-standing phobia in American culture that spawned a British equivalent with *Quatermass*, triffids and horror comics. While establishing the idea of the body as an empty shell, ready to be occupied by homeless spirits, Brown's method, evidenced in titles like *Night of the Living Dead*, as well as his working method, can be compared to the concept of 'imitation' in the 18th century. A combination of homage and rivalry, it depended on the assumption that any artwork existed in order to be challenged. Can the uglifications of worked impasto in '40s and '50s painting be justified by reference to Belsen or Hiroshima, where nightmare and reality merged? And in that case can Brown's distancing techniques be regarded as a necessary anaesthetic, administered to help us see clearly? Stifling the thickness of the original brushstrokes without reference to the emotion they generated may approximate some latter-day equivalent of the Brechtian 'alienation effect', thwarting emotional impact in order to encourage the play of logical argument and sane, moral judgement. Or does Brown's contribution serve the same purpose as an act of criticism, with the same urge to control, place and interpret? On encountering a title like *The Day the World Turned Auerbach*, it is hard to think otherwise. For the 'body snatcher' referred to in titles is, of course, the artist himself; the emotion has been cauterised, the desired effect circumvented. Moreover, the gesture of criticism is held to be one of total partiality, eerie in its powers of reconstruction but biased in its angle of vision and oblivious to any degree of

that might have informed the original. And of course, criticism stresses another type of contemporaneity: the proof of relevance, the demonstration that an artwork cannot be defined merely by historical concomitants.

If Brown pushes his strategies to the point of absurdity - 'I'm never interested in what the real thing is', he has observed - he remains secure in the knowledge that his versions of other people's paintings will prove subversive. While each move in the developing scheme was seen as subversive, the effect of the totality was equally so; his meta-oeuvre was expanding by means of a variation between focus and unfocus. Beginning with Ben Nicholson constructions, all fine edge and sheer surface, he embarked on apeshit figuration, only to follow it with hard-edged Surrealism. Salvador Dali's hotly debated reputation was for genius, (the word by which he described himself in the title of his autobiography); for becoming a sell-out (AVIDA DOLLARS was one detractor's arrangement of the letters of his name); for being a poseur (the moustache, for example) ... Given the benefit of the doubt, he could even emerge as the master of his own fate, a figure who used publicity and scandal in order to make a larger arena to exercise his undoubted talents. In 1992 came Brown's reading of *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans: Premonition of Civil War*. Against a ravaged landscape a vast body appears, in what Dali called 'a delirium of auto-strangulation'. At war with itself, screaming in pain, stands a figure of both cruelty and suffering. It is a response to the prevailing mood of Spain comparable in its seriousness to Joan Miro's *Man and Woman in Front of a Pile of Excrement* (1935) or Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Apparently in order to work on it in a more detached way, Brown turned the original on its side to copy it, then turned it back at last, as if the unusual depth of feeling in the painting might disturb his sense of strategy. Yet at this point, (when for the first time it seems that Brown as critic is at least preparing to enter into the spirit of the work in question instead of merely documenting it and leaving it to speak for itself), strange reversals occur - for example, in Brown's view of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Despite the extreme pain, both mental and physical, for which this painting is a concomitant, it is here that the artist takes an enormous risk. 'Dreaming participates in history,' wrote Walter Benjamin. This repainted work by Dali could be seen as a sermon on that very text. So, indeed, could Brown's entire enterprise.

For as well as asserting that no permanent division exists between dream and history, Benjamin described the fate of dream in the modern world as anticlimactic to the point of ordinariness. 'Dreams no longer open up a blue expanse,' he continued. 'They have become grey. The grey layer of dust on things is their best part. Dreams are now a pathway to the banal.' And with that word 'banal', Brown's project is thrown into sharp relief. The presence of death hangs over his body of work, as it must, perhaps, in the art of any society for which mimesis no longer remains the test of artistic truth.



# Galerie Max Hetzler

Frieze

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Photography, in particular, banalises works of art: eliminating traces of the hand, it minimises the role of size or even scale, alters colours (however subtly), and insidiously provides a version which replaces the original.

'Representations are formations, but they are also deformations,' wrote Roland Barthes. 'Never again will the real have to be produced,' replied Jean Baudrillard. Barthes' vision of representation as a game of Chinese whispers seems to assume that truth exists, a claim Baudrillard is keen to deny. For his part, Dali pondered both positions. Calling his paintings 'hand-painted photographs', he attempted what no photograph could achieve, apparently practising his expertise in traditional painting methods as a form of sabotage. The leap from impasto to thin paint represented by the shift from Auerbach and Appel to Dali is a long one. And as Brown's paint surface subdues direct expression by means of a protective layer which seals the work, making it more hermetic and less resonant, the image seems to be held captive, and the argument against fetishising paint is clinched. Though a painting is made up of brushstrokes, it ends as more than simply a collection of marks. After all, except according to the most banal definition of an artwork, perhaps, and paradoxically, it is this banality with which Brown does battle.

'Each one is my last painting', Brown has said, meaning that each new work alters the significance of the rest. Or, in other words, that the art lies in the order of the moves he makes, either because, as in a card game, one shift of emphasis alters the entire game, or because, as in chess, strategy is everything. Accusations of artistic cannibalism or lack of originality are beside the point; the works act as counters in a game which the viewer helps to create. To call it an endgame is to miss the point: there still is play. Indeed, in Brown's *musée imaginaire* every new acquisition modifies the meaning of the last, just as Brown's retitlings alter the interpretation of the 'original'. The rationale behind the moves in Brown's game remain unclear. (Indeed, even to use the term 'game' implies that the same rules govern each move, an assumption for which no evidence exists.) One thing is clear: the role not of taste (*goût*) but distaste (*dégoût*), a deeply felt obsession with the grotesque and its possibilities which could be explained by repression alone. For his recent Dali resembles soft pornography.

Arguably puritanical in response to signs of unbridled physicality, Brown has struggled so hard to make the grotesque banal, and therefore harmless, that it comes as no surprise to learn that he is now working on a version of an Arcimboldo portrait. For in Arcimboldo's, as in his own painting, more than one interpretation could hold sway. And as subdued versions of other painters' works assume the status of exhibits in an imagined collection of his own, meaning may be generated on parallel planes. Could it be that what Brown is painting is the sense of art becoming museal, in other words banal, sacrosanct, kitsch, easily arranged in patterns of our own? If so, there is something so heroic and foolhardy about the project that, like Balzac's unknown painter, Brown may achieve fame not by making any single artwork but simply by the legend that surrounds him.