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Glenn Brown's giant canvases

By Rebecca Rose

Glenn Brown is a self-styled contradiction. A painter with no ambition to paint the living world whose paintings are representational. An artist whose work doesn't reflect his interior world, yet whose canvases are expressionistic.

Brown mocks the artifice of painting and the bravado of the painter. Yet he is a technical master who produces giant paintings to hang in the airy white cathedrals of contemporary art.

This retrospective at Tate Liverpool visits Brown in the middle of a successful career. Over the past 18 years he has exhibited with the Young British Artists (although was never a signed-up clan member), was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2000 and has been collected all over the world.

Brown would argue that there is no such thing as "original" art. He has made a career out of copying paintings – yet he is every inch the contemporary artist. Where is the post-modern irony in that, you may ask? In the all-important twist. Brown's paintings are based on images of paintings.

He begins by searching for these images in books, magazines or on the internet. The more the painting has been altered by reproduction, the better. We usually see art through this prism, after all.

Brown is particularly concerned with how we evaluate a painting when you can no longer stand close to inspect the hand of the artist. By enlarging these reproductions for the viewer, he invites us to question received notions about the revered art of painting.

Some of the original works that inspired Brown's giant canvases were never even intended to be viewed in a gallery. "Böecklin's Tomb", (2.21mx3.30m), a highly detailed, giddily enveloping vision of a galactic city, is based on the illustration of a sci-fi book cover. Brown replaced the original lurid palette with softer blues which, combined with its new grandiose proportions, repositions the image firmly in the tradition of landscape painting.

Next to it hangs another giant vision in which mind-boggling perspectives and miniature universes draw you in like an IMAX cinema. A hellish elemental world of swirling fire, water and rock playfully titled "The Tragic Conversion of Salvador Dalí" that is actually after a painting by English landscape painter John Martin; a galactic city has been added for futuristic spin. Landscape painting made to look like sci-fi, and sci-fi recast as landscape painting – there's no such thing as high and low art any more, he insists.

Brown's wizardry with paint is used to devastatingly ironic effect in his works based on paintings by expressionist Frank Auerbach. Confronted with an original Auerbach, one is compelled to study the brushwork closely – surely his soul is encapsulated in that rich impasto? "Tosh!" says Brown. That is so last century: it is just paint.

From afar, Brown's canvases seem richly laden with paint – a language directly appropriated from Auerbach. Come closer and the canvas is screen-flat. How so? Brown invites the viewer to engage instantly. Is it a photograph? How can it be a painting? Come closer still, and there it is – evidence of the hand of the artist in the most minute, painstakingly fine strokes, as thin as threads, which pull together to look like big, bold brushmarks. It is nothing short of a brilliant joke.

Brown manipulates his chosen reproductions on Photoshop before painting them, playing around with colours, cropping and blurring to heighten the photographic effect. In his five paintings after the same Auerbach ("Portrait of J.Y.M"), Brown satisfies the tensions of renaissance perspective with the modernist insistence on the picture plane's two-dimensionality. By adjusting the images of the painted head so it has a photographic focal point and blurred edges, it appears both to protrude from the canvas and recede into it as if it were a photograph of a sculpture made of paint. And yet, up close, these paintings are photograph-flat.

In the same room is an sculpture made of paint, a weighty expressionistic lump in sherbet colours that looks good enough to lick. You can almost hear Brown laughing: "You want to know where that crusty paint is you were looking for? Well, here it is!" The sculpture is based on the same Auerbach portrait. At this point, you realise that Brown wants you to use your brain. And so does Tate, judging from the sparse curatorial information, and lack of audio guide.

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Portraiture is another area where Brown insists on questioning the status quo. Can a sitter's soul be "captured" for posterity? The answer is in the putrid green of a young boy ironically entitled "The Great Masturbator" based on a Rembrandt, or in the deathly blue skin and blinded eyes of a piece based on Van Dyck, titled "Sex". Brown's portraits are about the horror of death and have more in common with gory films such as *Young Sherlock Holmes*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* than their old master originals. Life and death, the kitsch and the macabre all seem chained together, as if they deserved one another. "I want my art to sit on the fence," he says. Uncomfortably, one suspects. In Brown's work, the devil is definitely in the detail.

'Glenn Brown', Tate Liverpool, to May 10. www.tate.org.uk/liverpool

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