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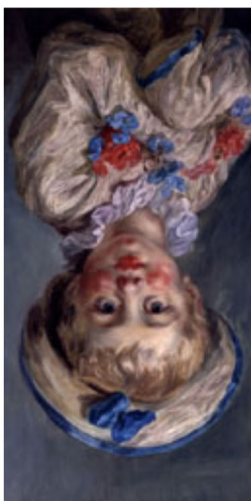
## Dawn of the dead

Glenn Brown's elusive, macabre new work is his best yet - and could be the future of painting.



**Jonathan Jones**

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Glenn Brown's *The End of the 20th Century* (1996) oil on canvas. Picture courtest Serpentine Gallery

No one who loves painting can fail to be interested by Glenn Brown. Painting is all he cares about. There is presumably a Glenn Brown who exists outside the studio, but this person is of no interest to himself and therefore has no claim on us. The Glenn Brown who exists in Glenn Brown's paintings shuns reality for the candlelit twilight of the painter's room, with a skull on a shelf and a palette greased with lubricious colour, as he prepares to make a copy of a stolen Rembrandt. He has created a certain scandale with his versions of previously existing works. The simplicity of his plagiaristic idea allowed him to exhibit as a "Young British Artist" in the 1990s - he was selected for the show *Brilliant!* that introduced this now defunct movement to the US - and to be shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2000.

But plagiarism is merely one of this man's proliferating vices. He is something far less reputable than a thief: he is a pervert. The painter Glenn Brown gloats over dead women, children, a foot. Most insatiably of all, he lusts for paint. The pleasure he takes in painting, which is quite infectious, is not wholesome. Painting for him is a dead thing,

and he glories in it with the abandon of a necrophile let loose in the catacombs of Palermo.

Oh dear. I seem to be plagiarising the manner of the 19th-century French art critic and poet Charles Baudelaire. The author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* might have liked Brown, whose retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery has just opened, more than I do. Besides, French art is Brown's loveliest reference point. He recently told an art magazine the work he would most like to own is *The Progress of Love* by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. This is a delightful affiliation. Fragonard is the most irresponsible painter in French history, who was loyal to the heady style of the rococo long after it was fashionable, continuing to celebrate parks and big hair when Greuze and David were ushering in virtue, truth and the Revolution. In 1789 Fragonard lost his aristocratic patrons; he died forgotten in 1806. He is a hero of the *recherché* and the worthless.

My only quibble with Brown is that Fragonard's lack of moral or intellectual justification is best exemplified by *The Swing*, or *Les hazards heureux de l'escarpolette*, in London's Wallace Collection - the most gloriously stupid masterpiece in the canon of oil painting. It depicts a young woman in frilly clothes on a swing in a garden that melts and shimmers with lush vegetation. As she goes up on the swing, she kicks her leg and her shoes flies off - but that's not the hazard heureuse the title refers to; a libertine youth in the bushes below, perfectly positioned, gets a direct view into her floating skirts. Magnifique! A pure concoction of paint, sex and wit, this painting exists only to give pleasure.

Brown, too, makes paintings that exist for play and pleasure, however odd and macabre that pleasure may be. One of the earliest pictures in his retrospective is a near exact copy of Fragonard's *A Boy as Pierrot*. Brown has turned the portrait of a sweet smiling kid in oversized fancy dress upside down, and called it *The End of the Twentieth Century*. He hasn't done much else. The title, like the image, is borrowed: Brown's paintings steal titles from films, songs, even clubs. In this case he rips off the German artist Joseph Beuys. The Fragonard he based it on, like *The Swing*, is in the Wallace Collection.

In the unchanging rooms of this London palace you are taken away from now, away from news and fashion, from nearby Oxford Street. You could spend a life here, as if on a space station - or in one of the science-fiction cities, floating in space, pinched from the artist Chris Foss, that Brown paints. You could start thinking you were an inhabitant of 18th-century France, or Victorian London, or that Joy Division singer Ian Curtis was still alive. You would begin to understand Glenn Brown.

Stop, stop. I have again adopted the rhapsodic voice of an enthusiast, and I don't know whether I am in the least bit enthusiastic about Glenn Brown. I have seen individual paintings by him in group exhibitions and been flabbergasted: thought, this is it,

painting's future. It's impossible not to be impressed by the intelligence and - say it - the sheer technical mastery of this painter. It's impossible, as I said, not to be interested in him. But is he interesting enough?

Seeing his works one at a time, they are gems, but all together, in big shows like this, they have dried in my eye. There is, first of all, that bizarre technique of his, the hyperrealist exquisite flatness within which he patiently reproduces, but without depth, the piled and ridged paint of more fulsome artists. In an early work he perfectly imitates an expressive daub by Karel Appel - you can see the smeared, piled, thick texture. Then you come close and realise it's as flat as a photograph. This, from 1993, is a flawed painting, a not-bad painting. A student effort. So is his upside-down Fragonard. They're clever, but you can trace the lineage of the idea too easily: it's not even unoriginal in all that original a way. Gerhard Richter meets expressionism! It's too glib. More than that, there's an introversion to Brown's pictures that makes them, in this exhibition, fail to spark off each other, to transform the space itself in any way, to dominate it as they surely ought.

The Serpentine's windows have been blocked to the world outside, the paintings have no competition, and there are a lot of them, but somehow they don't make this place their own. It's as if they are not quite there. This disappointed me. Then, unexpectedly, it started to delight me. I began to feel that the very point and power of Glenn Brown's painting lies after all not in plagiarism, or even hedonism, but elusiveness. His paintings run away from you like frightened rococo nymphs. Their first evasion is that trick of creating and then withholding the illusion of depth, both physical and emotional. But this is merely one of his escapes; the perhaps significant, perhaps random titles, the Old Master quotations that may or may not have meaning, are all designed to deny access.

Brown has finally overcome my suspicion that he was just a derivative technician. His newest paintings are by far the best he has ever done. Shame they all post-date his Turner nomination; now he is ready. Here is a bunch of flowers, wilting headily, in a deep atmosphere of blue, their sadness sentimentally enforced by the title, *On Hearing of the Death of My Mother*. But as you approach, drawn by the pathos of it all, something catches your eye. It is an eye, buried in the heart of a flower. Wet and animal and seeing, this is a horrific discovery in the painting's recesses - and here's another. Brown's most recent paintings exist somewhere baffling, a dead zone; the remotest room of the world's most neglected museum, where masterpieces become hideous.

His beacon now is not Fragonard but Rembrandt. There is a terrible authority to Rembrandt's portraits that makes you believe an undead person is in the room with you. Brown fixates on one of Rembrandt's most enduring personages, his wife Saskia. And he steals Saskia from Rembrandt. *Dark Star* (2003) derives from Rembrandt's *Saskia Laughing*, in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden. But Brown's laughing Saskia is scary,

unearthly. Rembrandt painted a person; Brown paints a painting. His Saskia lives, like Rembrandt's, but her life is unnatural. She is a ghoul, a zombie, a smiling phantasm. The bright green feather, greenish face, bright blue jewels, are the opposite of Rembrandt's muted colours. It is like seeing a loved face transfigured in a nightmare.

Death Disco (2004) is, if anything, more dislocated. It elongates and isolates Saskia from Rembrandt's painting Saskia as Flora, in the Hermitage in St Petersburg, replacing the dark setting with a pulsing yellow one. The new Flora's entire body, flesh and clothes alike, is a mass of writhing colours, exaggerated and gross. If this is life, it is unholy life, like one of Arcimboldo's grotesque fantasies of faces made from flowers and fruit. Life used to be too casually absent from Brown's paintings. His version of Fragonard lacked the one thing you can't deny this rococo entertainer - his vivacity. Rembrandt succeeded in preserving human life, just as still lifes preserve the life of flowers.

In his new paintings, Brown not only acknowledges this but makes it his theme. These paintings live - but vilely; they are monsters, revenants. As an artist Glenn Brown too has done what life does - he has evolved. But not into something pretty.

• Glenn Brown is at the Serpentine Gallery, London W2, until November 7. Details: 020-7402 6075.