

The Guardian

Jeffries, Stuart: Inside Dr Frankenstein's studio: Glenn Brown on his macabre mashups

24 January 2018

Interview

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Stuart Jeffries

Headless women, suffering ballerinas, Christ's rotting feet ... the onetime YBA reveals why he delights in turning paintings by old masters into new - and often repellent - works of art

Wed 24 Jan 2018 06.00 GMT



'I'm not sure why there's so much headlessness' ...

Glenn Brown in his studio. Photograph: Martin Godwin/The Guardian

Glenn Brown is showing me his latest sculpture, called Ain't No Flies on the Lamb of God. It could be three cars crushed in a breaker's yard painted in a jaunty style, or a trio of oversized candyflosses after a nuclear winter. But no. "It's my rendition of the crucifixion," he says. These three fibreglass and stainless steel pieces, each measuring more than two metres tall, will certainly tower over people, just as Christ and the two thieves did on Calvary.

"It's an image people have become blasé about," says Brown. "We pretend to look at paintings of the crucifixion, but we don't take on board what's there. That's how we cope." But why does he, as an atheist, care? "I live in a society that is predominantly Christian and

we have so-called Christian values - if you believe Theresa May. It's what surrounded me when I was growing up. A more horrible way of dying could not be imagined. It's all about making death as slow and painful as possible - and public. Then people sit before a crucifixion and say, 'Oh, that's nice, isn't it?'"

Nobody will call Ain't No Flies on the Lamb of God nice. Brown's three figures are based on paintings of feet by German artist Georg Baselitz. "When you see them in the flesh, you realise they're Christ's tortured feet and there's not much left of the toes - they're decomposing."



Let's Make Love and Listen to Death from Above ... the title is pinched from a song by Brazilian electropop band CSS. Photograph: Mike Bruce/courtesy the artist and Gagosian

Brown mutated Baselitz's paintings into sculpture then painted the results, with colours Degas used to depict ballerinas. Why? "There's an unpleasant note to Degas' use of colour which is fascinating. When he uses pinks and greens and blues together, there's something unnerving about it." Brown thinks this is fitting because Degas' dancers might be thought of as torture victims. "The pain that these girls had to suffer to dance en pointe would have been awful."

Much of Brown's art is like this: mashups of works repurposed so cunningly and emotively that one can scarcely spot what he has appropriated. He often uses Photoshop to distort, invert, overlay and change the colour of images of past works, before creating new pieces from them in paint or pencil. He then puts them in lovely old frames.

In the past, he has referred to himself as Dr Frankenstein, an artist who constructs paintings out of the "dead parts of other's work" to bring "a sense of strangeness" to

their depictions of the world. But today, Brown compares what he does with music. "What I'm doing in many ways is cover versions," he says showing me around the sculptures, etchings, drawings and paintings in Come to Dust, his new show opening this week at London's Gagosian gallery. "Though I'm using borrowed images, I'm putting them together in ways you've never seen before."

Like some musicians, Brown has got in trouble over allegations of plagiarism. In 2000, he was sued over Anthony Roberts' cover illustration for Robert A Heinlein's sci-fi novel Double Star. The case was settled out of court. While the threat of legal action doubtless haunts

Brown, he's convinced originality in art is a myth.

At Goldsmith's college in London in the late 80s, like many of his fellow students including Damien Hirst, he fell under the influence of Michael Craig-Martin, the charismatic teacher who became known as the godfather of Young British Artists. "Painting wasn't taught," he says. "Philosophy was taught. I realised you couldn't do anything original - because if you did something that had not been done before, it would not be understandable." Abandoning the idea of originality made art seem more fun and flexible. "It becomes a celebration, but not of the individual artist."

Like other YBAs, he lived in London under Thatcherism and his work took on a political resonance. "A lot of us were living in Shoreditch. On the other side of it was the City, which was the loadsamoney, never had it so good, philosophy. We were reacting to Thatcherism and saying there's a dark side to all this, an underbelly."



Droll titles ... Let me ferry you out to sea
To see who you could have been When
the time comes to row back in You'll be
in the place you should have been (2017)
Photograph: Mike Bruce/Glenn Brown.
Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

The dark side remains in Brown's work. The first thing I notice in his London studio is how many figures he's decapitated. His idea of the macabre, born in the Thatcher years, endures. One painting called *Passchendaele* (several works are named after first world war battles) looks like the rendering of a strutting Delacroix male nude minus a head. Another, of a woman with her naked back turned to us, is called *On the Way to the Leisure Centre* (his titles are often droll and this one quotes from his friend the poet Lavinia Greenlaw). The woman's head is shrunk to negligible portions.

"I'm not sure why there's so much headlessness," he laughs. "I suppose I thought it was rather interesting that men should like the image of a woman without a head as a way of having the most perfect woman. It's a form of misogyny, of course." It's also repulsive. "Why shouldn't art be repulsive?" Brown retorts. "In literature, film and music, there's an awful lot to repel you and to challenge you. And then you get beyond that sense of revulsion and you fall in love with something that previously you didn't think was lovable at all."

But there's more to this show than torture and dismemberment. There's also the carnivalesque. "From the start," he says, "I wanted to make great ideas that were operatic." And a negative review by the Guardian's Jonathan Jones helped. "In 2000, I did a show and he wrote that I was holding something back. He said, 'There needs to be a larger Glenn.' And he was right. So I became more, in the word he used in the review, carnivalesque."

Which explains one work looming over us, a grisaille called *Let's Make Love and Listen to*

Death from Above (a title pinched from a song by Brazilian electropop band CSS). The painting looks to me like a giddy, twisted take on Rubens' Fall of Phaeton: a swirling, cloudy skyscape teeming with writhing, heavenly figures. A bit grey but definitely carnivalesque.

Above all, the show celebrates Brown's seduction by painting and drawing. Even though his brushstrokes and pencil lines are ironic appropriations, and his every painterly gesture comes with quotation marks, they betray his love of the original works, from Rembrandt to Boucher, Bloemaert to Goltzius. "I fell completely in love with drawing again about four years ago. I love the delicate intimate movement of the hand as it draws a line. With Goltzius, for instance, you get this thrill of delicacy. Drawing has a freshness and passion painting often doesn't."

Does he ever yearn to depict something on a blank canvas, to be free of all that history? "I don't want to be free, no," he says. "Even if I was sitting in a field painting flowers, Monet, Renoir or Fantin Latour would be influencing me. We trawl art history around with us whether we like it or not. There's no escape - but it's not really a prison."

Come to Dust is at Gagosian, London, 24 January to 17 March.