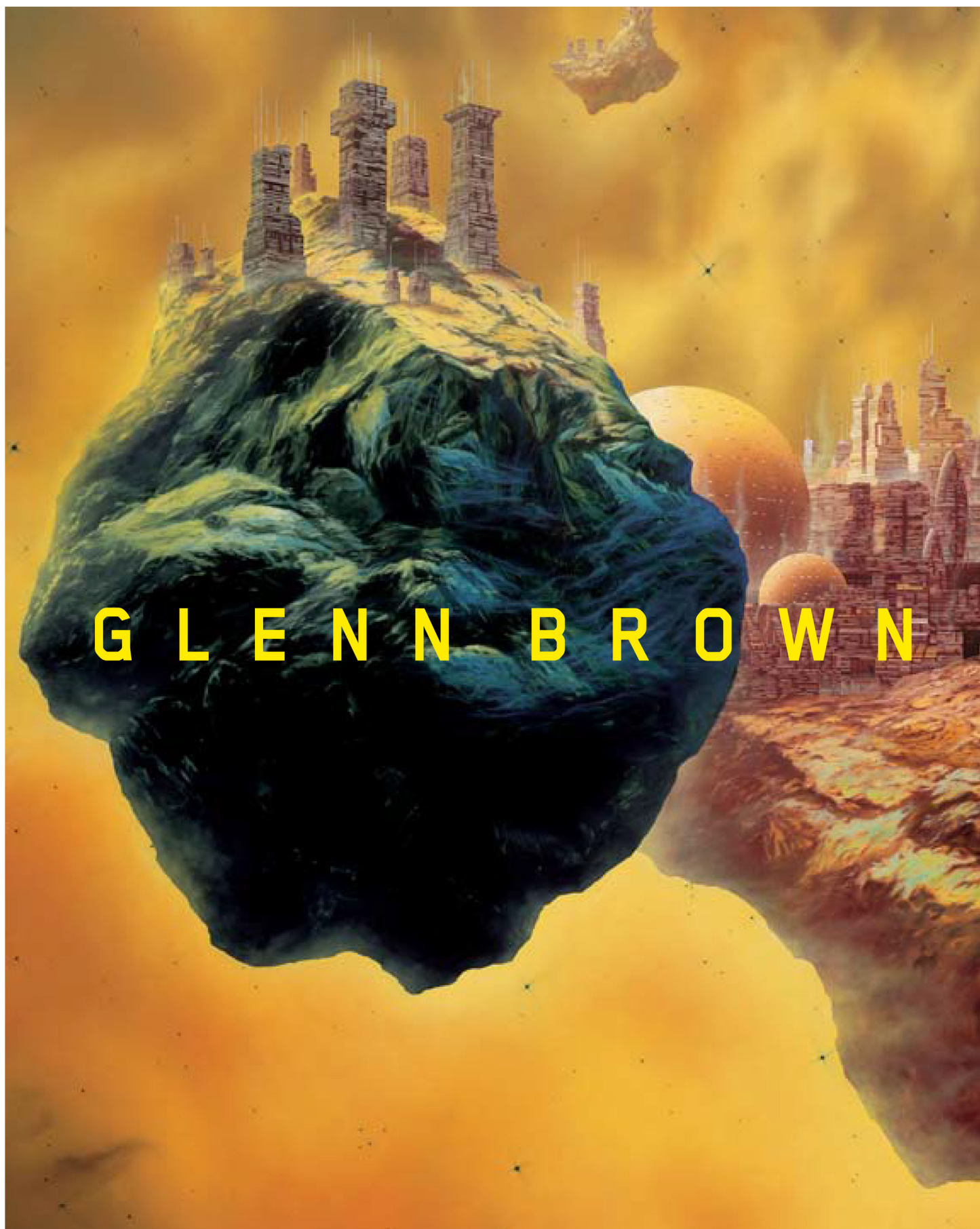


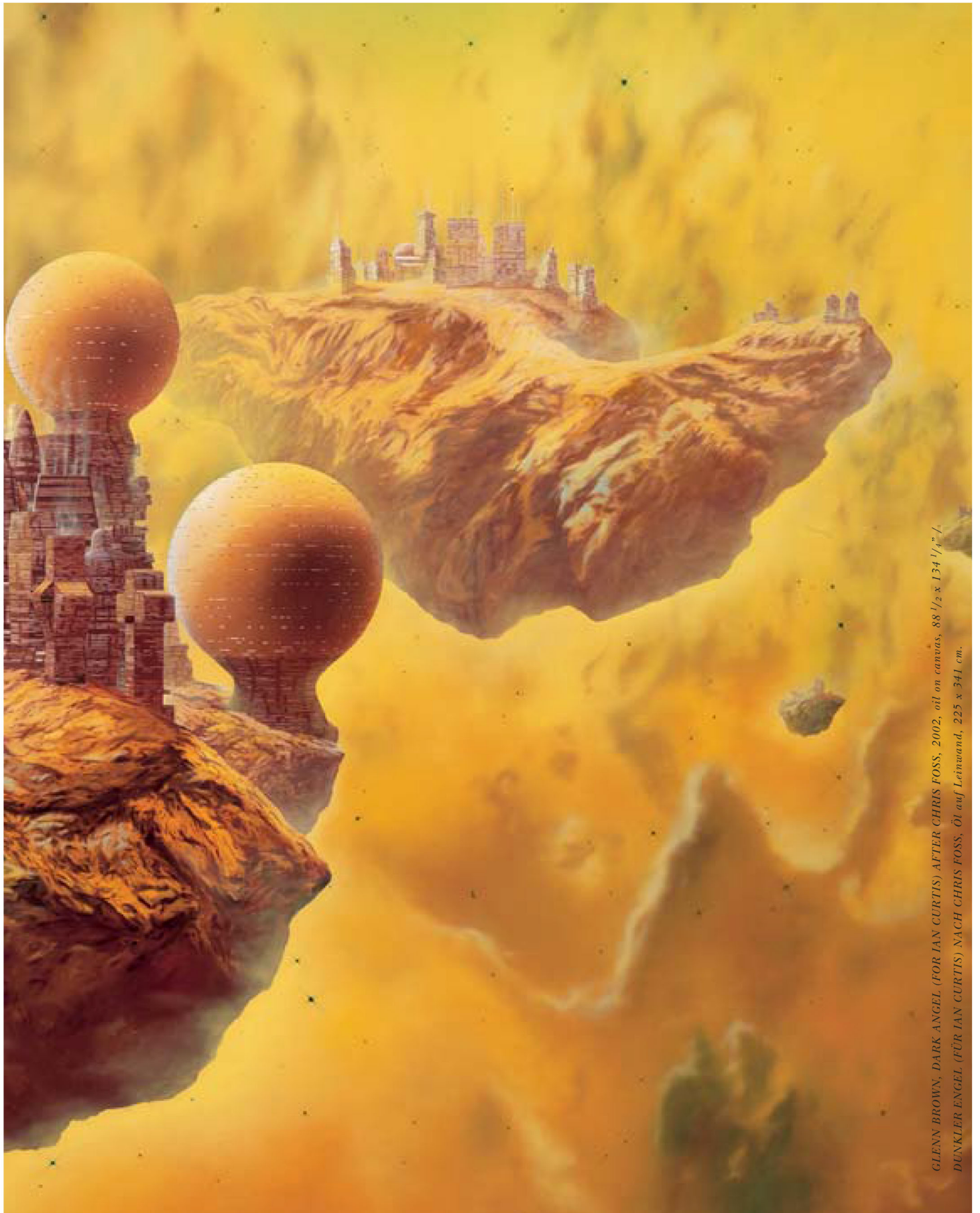
Galerie Max Hetzler

Parkett
Higgin, Jennifer: He Paints Paint
Vol. 75 2005



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GLENN BROWN, DARK ANGEL (FOR IAN CURTIS) AFTER CHRIS FOSS, 2002, oil on canvas, 88 1/2 x 134 1/4" /
DUNKLER ENGEL (FÜR IAN CURTIS) NACH CHRIS FOSS, Öl auf Leinwand, 225 x 341 cm.

Glenn Brown

JENNIFER HIGGIE

He Paints Paint

Euphoric backgrounds and hallucinogenic flesh; a mournful hilarity built from a loose accumulation of paint so tough it knits bones. Swirls of concrete fog are rendered with glassy smoothness while polluted hands and acidic limbs emerge from a bloated head; it's like looking at a Goya dancing beneath a strobe light.

His first major influence was a book of reproductions: *Images of Horror and Fantasy* (1978) by Gert Schiff. He treats other people's paintings like ready-mades. He wonders out loud how a child in a Rembrandt painting would enjoy a disco.²⁾ He says he enjoys the word "disco." He says he "paint[s] paint,"³⁾ and has declared art a form of "entertainment."⁴⁾

I visit his studio; it feels like I've interrupted a post-mortem. Four as of yet untitled, unfinished paintings are on the walls. Flesh is peeled back from a skull; what seems at first to be a cloud, and then a ghost, morphs into a woman. In these paintings the most hair-like of veins and translucent folds of skin are scrutinized to an unnerving degree. Something is disturbing in their evocation of memorable paintings; you feel you know the source, but can't quite name it—the sheer virtuosity of the paint application is distracting. Like a morbid whirlpool, colors clash

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*I'm rather like Dr Frankenstein,
constructing paintings out of the residue
or dead parts of other artists' work.¹⁾*

and spin, drift in and out of focus, build in intensity before being knocked back. There is something faintly violent in such dissection and rearrangement.

People may think that a single painting stimulates me to make a "copy," but I never make a direct quotation.⁵⁾

As if time were as pliable as paint, the artist flings his subjects into temporal tornadoes, blasting the past into, and then confusing it with, the present. Brown plunders images from his pantheon of favorite artists—including Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Georg Baselitz, Frank Auerbach, Rembrandt, and Chris Foss (the science fiction illustrator)—and reworks them (or parts of them) into something aggressively new and often contrary. He also loots the titles of songs he likes, and then applies them to paintings that seem to have nothing in common with the songs. Like fragments of partially remembered nightmares, a child from a painting by Fragonard, say, is reborn with de Kooning flesh and thrown head-first into the 1970s (DISCO, 1997–98), while a delicate little echo of a Rembrandt painting is thrust into the twentieth century via its vaguely Gerhard

Glenn Brown



GLENN BROWN, *DEATH DISCO*, 2004,
oil on panel, 52 ³/₄ x 35" / *TOTENDISCO*,
Öl auf Holz, 134 x 89 cm.
(PHOTO: GAGOSIAN GALLERY, LONDON)

Richteresque background and futuristic title, *I LOST MY HEART TO A STARSHIP TROOPER* (1996); a portrait of an eighteenth century woman is titled after a song by the post-punk band Public Image Limited—*DEATH DISCO* (2004)—and a painting by Frank Auerbach, his *HEAD OF J.Y.M.* (1973), is reborn as seven different paintings christened with titles as varied as *THE MARQUESS OF BREADALBANE* (2000) and *LITTLE DEATH* (2000). Brown mentions that the reproduction of the Auerbach portrait he had “was so old, discolored and blurred that it allowed me room to stretch, tilt and alter the composition and color in seeming infinite ways.”⁶⁾

Appropriation runs amok to such a degree it has become an apparition, a surface on which non-sequiturs create their own strange logic. The world, these pictures declare, doesn't need any more reproductions, it needs reinvention; most importantly, perhaps, it needs laughter—however dark.

*I am not happy until I have disoriented viewers by disrupting their perspective and their perceived place in the world.*⁷⁾

A fresh and filthy flower, a flourish stilled; a stretched torso; a face built from air. Details—a sickly eye, a boneless hand, a bloated toe—repel and attract with the confusion of a vicious joke turned tender. Every one of Brown's elegant arrangements of paint is an idea leavened with humor; greatness is simultaneously punctured and paid homage to. Such a mix of hyper-reality (the kind of reality that can only exist on canvas) and illusion can be disorienting; it is difficult to grasp that such complication is simply pigment painstakingly applied to a canvas with small brushes. Take for example *THE OSMOND FAMILY* (2003), named after one of the most saccharine, bloodless family bands

from the seventies. It's an image of a hideous, possibly dead, foot—its skin puckered with a mess of what could be gangrene or old plasticine, its toenails an asphyxiated blue. It's a cruel and cryptic joke of a picture, but I'm sure to anyone outside the Osmond family, a good laugh, if only in disbelief at the sheer oddness of its juxtaposed image and title. The same goes for the painting *SEX* (2004), in which an old man, who has possibly time-traveled from Spain in the seventeenth century, stares glumly at nothing, his melancholy eyes milky, his nose red, and his flesh a mottled blue—lust, it would seem, has a cold.

I start with a vague idea of the kind of painting I want to make, and I do small sketches of it. These will more or less determine the size of the painting, the color, the type of background, etc. but at that point I still don't know what the subject matter will be, or which artist will inspire the work. Then I spend some time looking through books and catalogues to find a painting that fits my idea as closely as possible. I look at hundreds of images to find a reproduction I can transform by stretching, pulling or turning it upside down so it fits into my practice.⁸⁾

This makes sense. Ghosts drift from the glassy surfaces of the magazines, books, and postcards the art student pores over when studying paintings. Despite the fact that, once reproduced, the most significant aspect of a picture—its surface—is reduced to a sliver of its real self, the original still manages to make itself felt. Brown's pictures embody this resistance to reduction: in his paintings, what might appear from a distance to be the gestural residue of a painter in a hurry, up close reveals itself as marks applied so slowly and thoughtfully that any first impression of haste is evidenced as *trompe l'oeil*.

It is, perhaps, both obvious and an understatement to observe that nothing in these paintings is what it initially appears to be. Each one, despite the unifying mark of Brown's brush, summons different specters and various ideas—the blind, dreamy froth of history (Fragonard), say, or time's clumsy invocations (Dalí and Foss); the blunt machismo of abstraction (Baselitz and Auerbach), or the dignity of deathly sentimentality (Sir Edwin Landseer). Nonetheless, the artists to whom Brown repeatedly returns share more than a modicum of concerns—a belief in the veracity of grand visions and even grander gestures,

an interest in the flimsy structures of life, death, myth and cliché, and the textures of the physical world that support them.

Even now, after painting has been through so much, Brown reiterates that there are new brush marks to invent and tired images to reinvigorate. He is a painter in love with his subject—the possibilities of paint—a love that he celebrates by occasionally remarking on its failures (what love doesn't?). Speaking about Rembrandt, for example, he says there is something to love in such “thick porridge-like painting,”⁹⁾ and his approach to Auerbach is that of a younger painter literally flattening and glazing the expressionist's credo that more paint equals more feeling, while never losing a sense of respect for the original. Imitation, as the saying goes, is the most sincere form of flattery.

Expecting either meaning or perception (or a mixture thereof) to be straightforward is futile. Every painting—and obviously not just those by Brown—is, to a certain extent, about levels of expectation, about what you want to see in an image, or what the artist wants you to see (often two different things), about what you've seen before and how you relate it back to what is in front of you. Tracing the provenance of a reaction is obviously as revealing of the viewer as of the painter. I have seen people look at Glenn Brown's paintings and step back, startled: this was not what they expected. But it is foolish to expect logic from a painting. Artists are not accountants.

1) Rochelle Steiner, *Glenn Brown* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2004), p. 96.

2) Glenn Brown in conversation with Jennifer Higgie (London: September, 2005).

3) Alison Gingeras, “Guilty: The Work of Glenn Brown,” *Glenn Brown* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2004), p. 16.

4) “Questionnaire: Glenn Brown,” *Frieze* issue 85 (September 2004), p.132.

5) Rochelle Steiner, *Glenn Brown* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2004), p. 95.

6) *Ibid.*, p. 98.

7) *Ibid.*, p. 99.

8) *Ibid.*, p. 95.

9) Glenn Brown in conversation with Jennifer Higgie (London: September, 2005).