Master Drawings
Turner, Jane in Conversation with Glen Brown: How Do You Define „Drawing“?
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How Do You Define “Drawing”?  

GLENN BROWN IN CONVERSATION WITH JANE TURNER  

On the weekend of 8-9 June 2019, as this issue was being prepared, Editor Jane Turner visited artist Glenn Brown (b. 1966) and his husband, Edgar Lugasina, in their East Anglian country house. Her arrival coincided with the announcement of the 2019 Queen’s Birthday Honours List, in which Brown was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his services to art.

JT: First of all, many congratulations on being named a CBE.

GB: Thank you. Texts have been arriving from friends since the early hours of this morning. We haven’t known long ourselves, for the official letter was accidentally sent to a previous address.

JT: Recently, I gave you and Edgar an after-hours tour of the Rijksmuseum’s exhibition All the Rembrandts in the Rijksmuseum, and at dinner afterwards you asked me a question that I’d like to redirect to you. How do you define “drawing”?

GB: A drawing to me (or rather how I perceive drawing) is “fine.” It’s something that I didn’t do for a very long time—that is, use just line. My paintings were very much about differences and gradations of color and tone. But then I started using white highlights and these coach painting brushes in my paintings to create long, sinuous lines that leave no trace of brushstrokes. And I realized that I was more interested in these long, sinuous lines—no straight lines, by the way, always curved—than I was in the effects of oil paint.

JT: What motivated that change from tonal to linear?

GB: Wanting to try something different—something that I couldn’t do. Maybe I was too comfortable with where my paintings were going, and the methods of starting and finishing them. I’d become too methodical, and I wanted to disrupt that in some way. And generally the most interesting thing about a good painting is its drawing. Because drawing is the real structure. It’s what holds the composition together. I’m not saying that you can’t make a purely tonal drawing. (Cézanne makes wonderful drawings that are just to do with light and dark and gray.) But I set out with some rules in mind. I was going to use only line. So black and white to start with. Black marks on a white ground.

JT: And you’re now using a colored ground as your mid-tone, rather like a chiaroscuro woodcut.

GB: I came to that chiaroscuro effect later.

JT: Did you aim to blur the boundaries between painting and drawing? Because those linear works are carried out on very different sorts of supports, including panel, and in very different scales?

GB: Well, my paintings in some way blur the
boundaries between *photography* and painting. Because my paintings look like photographs. They employ that shallow depth of field that you find only with photographs. The idea that certain areas are out of focus and blurry, and certain areas are very sharp and in focus; it’s something that I mimicked from photography. And the very sheer, flat surface of the painting makes it look more like a printed or photographic surface than it does a traditional twentieth- or twenty-first-century painted surface. In the drawings, the colored ground creates an artificial sense of depth.

JT: Some drawings are on conventional sheets of paper, but you also use other types of supports—supports that play with that sense of flatness and exploit the fluidity of your long brushstrokes. Can you tell us something about that?

GB: Of the supports are hard—aluminum or wooden panels—but basically it’s exactly the same process I employ, whether I’m using paper, a hard support, or polypropylene, which is a kind of graphic film. I think it was invented for architects.

JT: And that alters the character of the line that you can achieve with your brush?

GB: It’s a very smooth, matte surface. No texture other than this very uniform mateness which absorbs paint and pencil. My paintings have very thin, flat surfaces, so as soon as I encountered this smooth, plastic surface, it was perfect...almost like painting in air. It has very little resistance. So the line can be fluid and free-flowing and baroque. I wanted to make a kind of drawing where the line is at its most exaggerated (Fig. 1), where that sense of movement is almost like a graphic work.

JT: And since your work usually references artists from the past, if you were looking for that kind of “baroque” line, did that determine some of your choice of sources?

GB: Yes...not that I insist on the models being literally Baroque artists. The sources don’t always necessarily have very fluid lines. Nor am I always working from a drawing; sometimes I’m doing a drawing based on a painting. But everything I do is a combination of other artists’ works or a single artist’s work (or works). That is the starting point for each of the drawings. I’m looking for something that I can adapt, turn upside down, or change. I can see some holes for me to move into and appropriate, to make something else out of it.

JT: Who was the first artist whose work inspired that process?

GB: For drawings?

JT: Yes.

GB: I haven’t been drawing for very long. I only started in about 2015.

JT: Yes. Isabel Seligman’s article talks about that recent shift from painting to drawing (see p. 349). Could you explain what prompted this?

GB: That’s quite a strange story. I did an exhibition in New York of paintings and sculptures. The paintings were quite large and had taken me a long time to make, some literally years. My work is quite labor-intensive, and the whole exhibition had taken about three and a half years to prepare. After hearing a collector make a rather tasteless joke about a painting he’d agreed to buy, I thought, “Why have I just spent a year making this?” And that remark tipped something in me. (I should explain, the buyer got on very well with this collector and he’s a good friend.) But I concluded I didn’t want to spend a year making every work. I wanted to do something quicker, more personal, and smaller. Nothing to do with this bombastic idea of large oil paintings or the commercial art world.

The first drawings I made were after Adolph Menzel, because I’d already made some feet paintings, based on a famous painting by him in the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin. And I did some drawings of that feet by Menzel. My first
drawings were awful. They were crude, and the lines were awkward and jagged, and I didn’t really know what I was doing. But the more awful my drawings were, the more intrigued I was by them.

JT: ...by the process?

GB: Well, I had to question, what is a good drawing, what is a bad drawing, and why are mine bad? That’s interesting. And you start looking at drawing and you realize there are so many drawings in the world you haven’t looked at, and I became obsessed. I’d go into the studio and think, “What shall I do today? A painting or a drawing?” “I’ll do some drawing.” And the next day, the same question, and again I’d choose drawing. It’s more interesting. After two and a half years, I hadn’t made any paintings. I’d just been obsessed with drawing. Then I made a few paintings again, but now it seems I’ve gone back to drawing. For the last year and a half, I haven’t made any oil paintings.

JT: And they’re finished works. You don’t really make preparatory studies in aid of a painting.
Figure 2

GLENN BROWN

Drawing 1 (after Bloosworn), 2018

Private Collection (C
Glenn Brown, 2019)
GB: Absolutely, I’m trying to make a work of art, which is a drawing. It’s me trying to say that drawing is every bit as important as— if not more important than—painting.

JT: In terms of our readers, you’re preaching to the converted, but can you explain what makes you say that?

GB: Because drawing is the “skeleton” of a painting. It’s what holds the painting structurally together in terms of composition. It’s something that is very personal to an artist. It’s the handwriting inherent in each individual mark, which somehow in a painting can become slightly muddier.

JT: You can disguise more, conceal more in a painting....

GB: Painting is more about technique and technical ability. You show off in terms of your blending of color. Color can disguise a not-so-good drawing. You add some color and you don’t notice that it’s not working. But if you take away the color, whether it’s a good or bad drawing is absolutely evident.

JT: Can you explain a little more about your process? I know that you work mostly from reproductions from books, which you then manipulate on your computer through Photoshop.

GB: Very often I will have an idea for a work. I may perhaps see a drawing or painting by an artist, and I think I want to make something like that. I want to make a portrait, for instance, a sixteenth-century head study, where the artist has changed his mind and redrawn it, so that it has two heads, maybe even three. Do such examples lie behind your multiple layers?

GB: I have, but I’ve also been influenced by sheets with multiple studies on the same page, seen side by side, sometimes overlapping one another. Sometimes you see an artist who has sketched a portrait from two or three different angles, and I’ll cut them up and overlay them and make one head with these three overlaid images. Or sometimes the overlaid images are from completely different artists from different centuries. Because I want to formulate this mutant, slightly monstrous, distorted figure.

JT: For many years it was mostly figurative sources, literally figures and heads. But I know that more recently you’ve become interested in the work of Abraham Bloemaert and landscape. What motivated that new avenue of exploration?

GB: It’s less about landscape, more specifically about trees. Tree stumps or an entire tree (e.g., Fig. 2). It’s that sense in which the tree is a figure.

JT: Bloemaert’s trees are quite anthropomorphic! Wizard of Oz: trees coming to life....

GB: Well, I was brought up in the countryside, and the idea of the Green Man—or the spirit that lives within the woods or woodland—is quite important to me.

JT: On a walk one day, I photographed you standing next to one of your favorite trees (Fig. 3), an enormous, gnarled oak with a very “Glencairn Brown” pattern of swirling bark on its trunk (Fig. 4).

GB: The idea of the way that a tree grows and accumulates scars and is deformed by the world, by wind and rain and rot and woodpeckers. Life comes to it and leaves its mark on it, just as it does people and their faces. Some of the drawings and etchings I’ve made are quite literally faces of
A child or an adult enwined or hidden within the branches of a tree (Fig. 5). Again the idea of the spirit of the tree... And that link between a portrait of a human and a portrait of a tree is very literal in many cases.
JT: I know that you work mainly from reproductions, often at some remove from the source itself—reproductions that sometimes have printing faults or blemishes. In Isabel’s article, she mentions the little circles that appear in the background of some of your drawings, and I noticed in the case of your drawing inspired by Gossaert’s drawing in the Albertina (see Figs. 5 and 6 on pp. 357–53) that the circles actually coincide with fixing spots in the reproduction. Is that a random coincidence? Or do the circles mean something?

GB: These marks in many of the paintings and drawings I’ve made are stars or points of distant light, really. In some of the portraits, I give this rather abstract ground. I like the idea of a portrait in which the individual inhabits no particular space or time. I’ve also made science fiction works, so a lot of these little points, circles, and crosses I put in the background are reminiscent of stars.

JT: She describes the motifs in that one drawing as circles on the left side and crosses on the right side, a kind of pun on the children’s game of Noughts and Crosses.

GB: It’s basically making little points to stimulate the eye. Especially in a very linear drawing, your eye slides around the work, up some marks, down others, and it stops at little points, and then it moves to another point...

JT: They’re full of movement, your drawings.

GB: I want to keep your eye moving. Because as soon as your eye stops, you’re bored, and you move on to look at something else. I’ve always been interested in the idea of a work that controls a viewer’s eye movements. The better the work, the more controlled and systematically the viewer will move his or her eye around it. And that creates a sense of narrative. If everybody is drawn to one particular point to start with, then drifts to another point, then slides to another point... A good drawing should continue to stimulate as long as possible. A very simple drawing can be stimulating for a long time. Paul Klee is a good example of an artist who gives snakes and ladders with your eye—or perhaps pinball is a better analogy. Your eye bounces around this flat surface—as well as in and out because there is also depth.

JT: You’re a collector yourself. Can you tell us about the kinds of works you collect and the extent to which they stimulate what you do?

GB: Certainly when it comes to drawing, I like to collect works that I might use in some way, or work from. Or just to have them in the studio to look at and to show how a good drawing works. I’m continually stealing ideas from other artists, and actually to have the real drawing and not just a reproduction of it just gives you that extra lift.

JT: Have you created works that are in direct dialogue with works in your own collection?

GB: Oh, absolutely. I have a drawing of a bearded man by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (Fig. 6),1 which I’ve used for probably about fifteen different works (e.g., Fig. 7 and front cover).2 And also works by Abraham Bloemaert. There’s one drawing we bought which is actually six works that have been cut up and reassembled, they think possibly by his son (Fig. 8).3 And that was the starting point for this mural that I’m hoping to make, which so far exists only in some drawings. If Bloemaert’s son can cut up drawings and combine them to make a woodland scene, then I thought I could go further and get as many images of Bloemaert together as possible and we’d cut them up and stuff trees around and create a whole panorama of Bloemaert pieces. I like the animation in his trees. I like the anthropomorphism in them. And his line is gorgeous and very evocative.

JT: Can you tell us a bit more about the project you have in mind for the Bloemaert mural?

GB: It’s a fixed space, so it’s site-specific. It’s a rectangular room of about 5 by 10 meters. And the mural will wrap around three walls of this room,
GIOVANNI DOMENICO TIEPOLO

Head of a Bearded Man Looking up to the Right

Collection of Glenn Brown

Figure 6 (left)

GLEN BROWN

Swing Time, 2016

Private Collection © Glenn Brown, 2019

Figure 7 (right)
pretty much from floor to ceiling, so I want you to feel as though you’ve entered this woodland scene. That could exist in terms of a painting, but on that scale I can’t really do anything other than a drawing—even though my method of drawing is not much quicker—or it would take me the rest of my life! As it is, it is probably going to take many years to make such a large drawing. So, at the moment, I’m experimenting with color, the way the line is put on, trying to figure out what color the ground should be, what creates a good sense of depth, whether the ground should vary.

JT: And these are the studies that we’ve seen downstairs in your studio today (Fig. 9)?

GB: Yes, so it could exist as just a black-and-white drawing, a white ground with black marks on it, or it could exist as a brightly colored ground, either blue or yellow ochre or brown, with dark
marks and light marks on it. So I’m trying to find the best technique to create something that is going to have the right atmospheric quality to it.

**JT:** Most of your drawings are black and white, or black and white on a colored ground, but a few have additions of quite vivid colored strokes (e.g., Fig. 10). Is that something you’ve always done, only when you started making drawings, or only more recently?

**GB:** I’ve been doing it all the way through to some extent. Some of the drawings have watercolor of two or three colors. It’s still quite a limited palette. Again, just to create a certain compositional variety, to bring some areas forward, to push others back. To use warmer colors and colder colors to create a sense of depth. But the aim is still to keep it basically linear, a work of art that is purely line. I’m still experimenting. It’s quite early days with the use of color in the drawings. Even if there is a strikingly strong blue or yellow or other ground, they are still ostensibly black-and-white works.

**JT:** That’s why I drew the analogy with chiaroscuro woodcuts. Essentially you have your highlights, tone block, and lowlights (in other words, your key block).

**GB:** The starting point was Venetian eighteenth-century drawings on blue paper.

**JT:** Like your Domenico Tiepolo, where the white and black chalks create the modeling of the head on the mid-tone of the blue paper...

**GB:** Dürrer did similar things using black and white chalks on blue paper, and also on other colored grounds, such as brown.

**JT:** Especially after discovering blue paper during his trip to Venice in 1494.

**GB:** To start with, my grounds were always blue or blue-gray. But I actually found that using much stronger colors or warmer colors, for instance pink and other.... Rather than the bright color pushing forwards, it doesn’t. It recedes and creates a greater sense of depth. I still don’t fully understand why a blue ground should make the painting flatter, and why a bright yellow ground, which should come forward, actually recedes when you put black marks on top of it.

**JT:** And you have an interesting technique for applying these toned grounds, especially when you’re using the polypropylene.

**GB:** The drawing is often made without any background color at all since the polypropylene has no color, only a matte, translucent finish. So I can either lay a card with a colored background behind it, which will alter the ground to either warm or cool, or I can paint the back of the polypropylene. If I do that, I can get a stronger, more intense color.

**JT:** So you do that as a second phase? You don’t start with your mid-tone? You move front-to-back, so to speak, with your lowlights and your highlights and then modify their appearance depending on what you put them on top of?

**GB:** It’s a very odd process, because I’m starting a drawing not knowing what color the ground will be. That’s because I want to see how the drawing is going to turn out before I make that decision.

**JT:** You’re leaving your options open.

**GB:** When I do, of course, eventually decide what color the ground should be and paint the back of the polypropylene, all the values of the drawing alter. So then I have to start on the drawing all over again to make it work, and I enjoy that shift that the drawing undergoes.

**JT:** Do you have an order? Do you start with the blacks and move to the whites?

**GB:** I mostly start with black and then add white.
Figure 59

GLENN BROWN

Danny’s Songs,
2016

Private Collection (C
Glenn Brown, 2017)
on top of it. But then I'll go back and add black, so you'll get black overlying white and vice versa. I keep working until I can't think how to improve the work. But I very often overwork things. It's my biggest fault.

JT: What do you mean?

GB: That I don't know when to stop making marks. I would love to be Matisse and make a portrait, which is very simple and pared back, with just a few lines on it. Then again, perhaps I wouldn't like to be Matisse, because then I'd look at someone like Dürer who has an extraordinary sense of detail in his work, and I'd think, "Why would I want to be Matisse when I could be Dürer?" So I'm always stuck between this idea of simplifying a drawing and then making it beautifully complicated and keeping your eye encapsulated within the work.

JT: I've noticed you're very much inspired by Rembrandt's etchings, but not so much by his drawings. I love the economy of means of some of his drawings, which is unlike the tonal mesh of his etchings. Have you used his drawings?

GB: I have used his drawings, but I find I prefer those by some of his students, for example Govert Flinck and Jan van Noorden.

JT: Flinck has a denser crosshatched pen-and-ink style. Is that why, do you think?

GB: Yes, they're more dynamic and fluid than Rembrandt's slightly scratchier drawings. His etchings are more labored and, I find, more fun to look at. He uses the etching plate as a way of creating lines, which have a greater fluidity to them. The etching tool just slides around the surface, which is strange, because it is not sliding at all. It's cutting into a copper plate.

JT: It takes a tremendous amount of skill and control to be able to create fluid, curved lines with a burin or etching needle in a hard metal surface.

GB: Exactly. Rembrandt's somebody who moves the etching or drypoint needle around with absolute mastery. He seems to care much less when he's drawing. He's more relaxed, more off-guard as a draftsman.

JT: That's what appeals to me as a drawings specialist, that rawness, that honesty. He shows tremendous skill but doesn't care if he occasionally makes a mistake.

GB: I quite like artists who try not to make mistakes. But it depends on my mood. Sometimes it's from mistakes that I start fantasizing and creating alternate heads and faces within a work and making the Rembrants come alive in a more surreal manner (see Fig. 25 on p. 366).

JT: What other favorite draftsman have inspired you?

GB: Raphael, whose fluidity of line is beautiful. Rubens's drawings are again wonderfully sculpted, with a great sense of depth and a relative economy of line. In more modern terms, artists like Hans Bellmer, who I think has a beautiful, controlled, precise use of line, which is very rare in twentieth-century art.

JT: He's an artist by whom you have several drawings in your own collection.

GB: Yes, he's somebody whom I want to have next to me, not that I have used any of this work. It's just I want a bit of what he does. I want to be influenced by his methods of working. An artist whose drawings I have used a lot is Fragonard. He was famous for drawing extremely quickly, and he would do drawings in front of an audience, executing the subjects suggested by the people.

JT: If there's one overriding quality to the sources that inspire you, do you think it's fluidity? Is there one common characteristic or thread? Or is there no limit to the range of styles and periods that have influenced you?
GB: It's easier if I have an artist who uses line particularly well. But the drawing doesn't have to be calligraphic. Like Rembrandt, the artists can be quite angular the way they make marks, and I'll come along and transform those marks into something more fluid. I don't want a source that looks too close to what I'm trying to do. That's probably why I wouldn't use Hans Bellmer. I also like some of Salvador Dalí's drawings. He's made lots of awful drawings, but at his best in the 1930s and '40s, his drawings were phenomenal, again using repeated, flowing, scratchy lines. I think at some point he discovered the ballpoint pen. You can see the drawings become that bit more fluid. The line just glides effortlessly. I know that Picasso, for instance, was given some BIC ballpoint pens in the 1950s, and you can see him playing around with these pens and thinking how wonderful they were, moving around in a way he'd never encountered before.

JT: Do you ever use pencil or ballpoint pen to make sketches in that quick, initial preliminary manner? I ask, because what you do as a draftsman is so labored, so careful, so complete. Do you ever just pick up a sketchbook and a pencil or pen and dash off a doodle, a scribble or a sketch?

GB: Not very often. If I do, it's to note down ideas, but, strangely, never for a finished work. My work tends to be very methodical. If I make quick drawings, it is never with the idea that they are going to become finished works. I sometimes do life drawings, or a portrait of somebody. That's what I do for fun, not as a professional artist. But I think it's important for any artist to be able to translate the three-dimensional world into two dimensions.

JT: Unlike many of your contemporaries, in your training, you had classical life drawing lessons. Do you think that has influenced how you approach your art now?

GB: It must have, but my biggest influences to start with were Conceptual. I always say that I'm a bit of a back-to-front artist (painter or draftsman), because I started thinking from a Conceptual point of view, the way that Gerhard Richter works, using photography as a starting point. Gerhard Richter doesn't make drawings. I would say that he doesn't really make paintings, either. He's a Conceptual artist who uses paint to create paintings that are "conceptual essays" on what painting is (or what drawing might be), but he doesn't worry about composition. So I began with the idea that composition accidentally formed itself in the process of you making a work, but I quickly realized that you ended up making dull paintings to look at if you didn't worry about composition. So I've had to relearn all the aspects of composition and drawing that I threw out when I became a Conceptual artist, and I've had to bring them all back again—those tools of color, line, composition, and depth. And I'm still learning.

JT: I'm going to steal your "back-to-front" descriptor for my final question. I know that artists are sometimes irritated by interviewers' questions or by what might be misinterpretations by critics who write about their work. So, enough about what I think the readers of Master Drawings might like to know about you and your work. What would you like to ask yourself or share with our readers?

GB: It would be something along the lines of "Why am I interested in the phenomenon of being beautiful and ugly at the same time?" What is the psychological explanation for why I feel the need to create something, which, in some sense, is very irritating to look at (which I think my drawings are, because they're overly intense and unpleasant in a strange way)? And also something that is very beautiful and crafted and elegant and fluid and baroque. Why is it that I want both of these things at the same time in the same work? That sense of the work being both figurative, easy to recognize, and elegant, and yet ugly, abstract, and awkward.
GB: I think that’s the real basis of why I want to make art. I want to understand the human body and the human face, even if sometimes that human takes the form of a tree. What is it that I am trying to get out of the human body? What psychological reasoning do I have to want to make portraits? What am I trying to tell people?

JT: Perhaps to express something of the duality inherent in all aspects of life?

GB: But why does it have to be... As my mother once asks, “Why do you have to make such ugly paintings? Why can’t you paint nice things? Why do your flowers end up being rather unpleasant? Why can’t you just make them nice?” And I never quite knew how to answer her. People don’t seem to like just nice things, do they?

JT: But they do seem to love your art. Thank you for daring your thoughts about it with me.

*Jane Turner is the Editor of “Master Drawings” and the Head of the Rijksprentenkabinett, Amsterdam.*

EDITOR’S NOTE
Where possible, Glenn Brown’s drawings are here reproduced in their antique frames, since the frames are often the starting points for the drawings. Brown finds it a particular challenge to create works of art that have as much “character” as their often exuberant frames.

NOTES
1. Acrylic paint on film, over cardboard; 310 x 385 mm. IMAGE: StudioPic.
2. *Inv. no. FNG 83/98 ink on panel; 38.5 x 33.5 cm.* see www.umb-digital.de/MuseumPubi/News.
3. Indian ink and acrylic paint on film, over panel; 459 x 642 mm; see Glenn Brown: Gone to Dust, exh. cat., London, Gagosian Gallery, 2018, no. 35, repr. (in color); and https://glenn-brown.co.uk/artworks/681. IMAGE: Mike Bruce.
4. Indian ink and acrylic on polyester film, over cardboard; 392 x 298 mm; see London 2018, no. 32, repr. (in color); and https://glenn-brown.co.uk/artworks/573. IMAGE: Mike Bruce.
5. Black and white chalk on blue paper; 272 x 202 mm; sale, London, Christie’s South Kensington, 2 December 2014, lot 45, repr. (in color).
6. Fig. 7. Indian ink and acrylic paint on panel; 114 x 91 cm; see Terry Antrim R. Neff, et al., Glenn Brown, exh. cat., Des Moines, Des Moines Art Center, and Cincinnati, Contemporary Arts Center, 2016, no. 28, repr. (in color); and https://glenn-brown.co.uk/artworks/519. Front cover: Indian ink and acrylic paint on panel; 84 x 60 cm; see London 2018, no. 46, repr. (in color); and https://glenn-brown.co.uk/artworks/517. BOTH IMAGES: Mike Bruce.
8. Oil, Indian ink, and acrylic on panel; 82 x 123.5 cm; see London 2018, no. 41, repr. (in color); and https://glennbrown.co.uk/artworks/510. IMAGE: Mike Bruce.