

Mandy

LOVES

Declan

1000%

After a decade in which fashion and popular music overshadowed other aspects of British culture, a gradual revision is taking place, with no help whatsoever from the British themselves, whose polite understatement continues to dominate their view of their own culture. Outside the Far East, it would be hard to find another country where plain talk is tantamount to obscenity or caste and class are so nearly aligned. Foreign visitors discover that daily life in Britain still requires an interpreter; in this country what Erving Goffman used to call "the presentation of self" has reached Baroque extremes. The problem is that there is no perceptible problem. Here emotional tumult manifests itself in a twitch of the ear. When John Le Carré's novel *Smiley's People* was adapted for British television, for example, millions of people watched for what seemed like an eternity, as Alec Guinness (playing George Smiley) wandered alone through parks, turning leaves over with his shoe, or examining the trunks of trees, or ignoring naked women in sex clubs, or just sitting and waiting. This prodigious feat of concentra-

tion on Guinness' part required an equally prodigious feat of concentration for his viewers. In plain words, of course, either this was acting or it was not. Only the personal charisma of Guinness himself, an actor who has succeeded in giving away nothing about himself for his entire career, could have succeeded in inducing a state of near trance. Equally fascinating was an incident early in the history of the British soap-opera, *East Enders*, when Angie's husband Den had run off with a neighbour, who brought around some of his shirts that she had mended, confronting his distraught wife, not for the first time. When she left, Angie sat and, with painful slowness and almost berserk deliberation, ripped his shirts to pieces and proceeded to take an overdose. Again and again in Britain what looks like nothing becomes a powerful focus. Could it be that the secret of British culture lies in some Zen-like realization of who, where and what you are? And if that sounds like Zen, there must surely be psycho-social *Koans*, little nuggets of meaning to be bitten like ripe fruit, revealing the secret they contain. Walking

through a housing estate in Camberwell, South London, Alex Landrum found a *graffito* he used as the title of a work. On the tiled entrance hall of a dilapidated block of flats, he found the freshly written words "MANDY LOVES DECLAN 100%," a black-and-white proclamation in a gray world.

For artists in London, such full throttle confidence has been in short supply since the start of the recession. But with the decline of the gallery system, artists began taking matters into their own hands, finding empty, disused or unlettable buildings, restoring them and exhibiting their work there. *Freeze*, *Building One*, *East Country Yard* and other temporary events in South London; the magnificent Cubbitt space in North London; *Fresh* at various sites; the group show explorations in East London; *Milch*, uniquely in Bloomsbury, very near the exact center of the city, and others have compensated for the state of the gallery system by the kind of excitement that would rival any European capital. Some of these renovated spaces remained and began to resemble professional galleries: City racing near the Oval, The Agency in Rotherhithe... (The list could be augmented by adding, for example, Transmission in Glaslow, for the trend was not limited to London.) One approach in particular benefited from the constant encounter with new spaces; the spirit of installation was kept alive by such tactics, and with it the essence of British Conceptual practice, consecrated in London by Anne Seymour's exhibition *The New Art* at the Hayward Gallery in 1971. In the long run, the influence of this had less to do with heightening the profiles of Gilbert and George or Richard Long, both included in Seymour's collection, than in preparing the ground for an approach to British art teaching that ended the domination of Caroesque formalism and all it implied. *The New Art* included disgruntled students from Caro's stronghold, St. Martin's school of art who later became teachers in their own right: John Hilliard, Bruce McLean and others. In turn, their approach was passed on to younger artists. One link between some

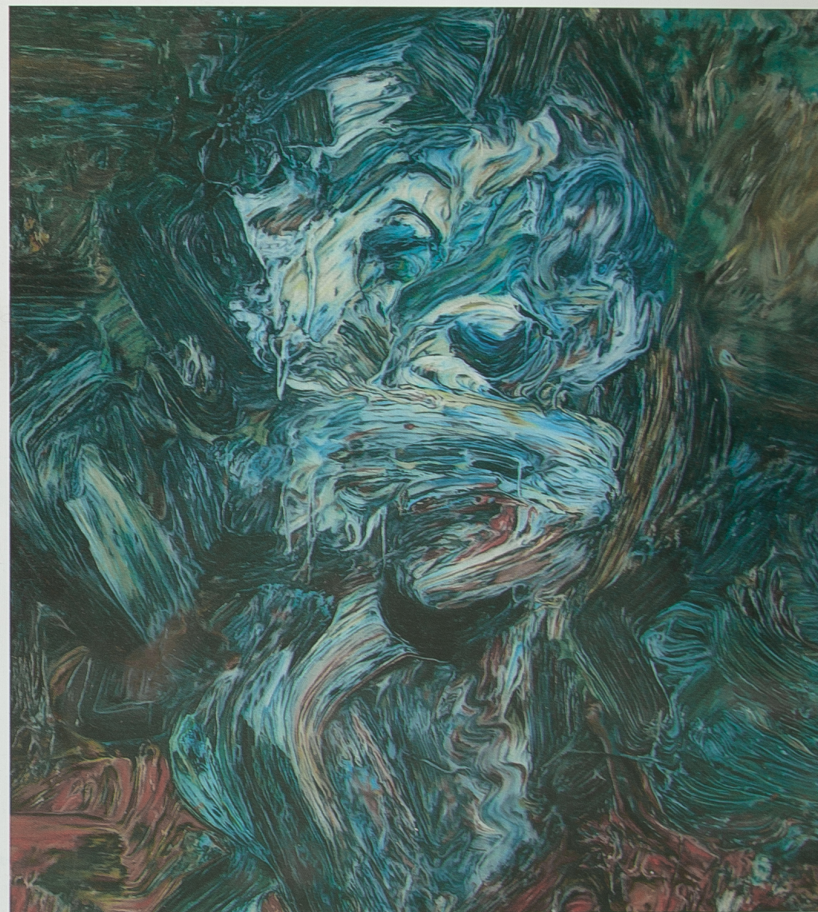
of the artists included in Mandy Loves Declan 100% was the Goldsmiths College M.A. course, which has produced Glenn Brown, Adam Chodzko, Michael Stubbs, Stephen Glynn and others. Weaned on late conceptual or minimalist theory, their work is clear and witty, though their "subject matter" is anything but obvious. Victorians like Disraeli and Mrs. Gaskell invented "the state of the nation" novel. These artists make forays into the national consciousness, using the devices of journalism in Wearing's case or the pub conversation in Coventry's. Only Brown seems guilty of making art about art, until it becomes clear that he, like Glynn is involved in questions of patriarchy. If, indeed, painters like Auerbach, Kossoff, Kitaj or any of the self-professed "School of London" could be seen to exercise any influence whatsoever on artists of his age. For young British artists are free to invent their own artistic genealogies.

Charges of eccentricity have been and continue to be leveled against the British in general and the British artist in particular. (Walter Sickert is now treated as a serious suspect in the Jack the Ripper case; after his death and the publication of his diaries, Kieth Vaughn became far more famous for having made his own masturbation machine with adjustable speeds than he ever had of been for his paintings; invited to lecture, Alan Davie still turns up in rope sandals and plays jazz on his saxophone. . .) Younger artists take a different approach; if the world does not make sense, that senselessness should be manifested. Not in surrealism, for which there has never been any need in a country which began and continues to be surreal, but in proposing oddity as a subject for discussion. Coventry's football hooligans, Wearing's transsexuals, Glynn's mentally disturbed boys, Wallinger's misunderstood campaigner for sexual rights, Chodzko's wish to irritate by trespassing on other people's territory, all suggest a common ground in the idea of community. In a country which remains skeptical about the value of art making itself, it is hardly surprising that the issue

of the outsider is still discussed. In Britain, the idea that artists might fit in is unthinkable, except for Royal Academicians or society portrait painters, and the philistinism of the media is unrelenting. Little wonder that strangeness in itself becomes a topic for discussion. Social outcasts remain social outcasts, however. This is what we find. Perhaps their only hope is some private *satori*. In one of his novels, William Golding described a man who hung about in public lavatories, not for aesthetic reasons - though Victorian conveniences in particular are places of great beauty - nor, apparently, to pick up other men, since this seldom if ever happened, but rather as a form of meditational device. Like the artists who yearn for a state of 100% love, 100% commitment, 100% confidence, he was probably waiting for his moment of realisation, here, now, in Britain.

GLENN BROWN paints Frank Auerbachs using a method he invented himself. He flattens brush strokes so that they are robbed of emotional impact. Their result is not painting of painting but painting of photographed paint, a meditation on originality and our meditated perception of a "classic." Each of Brown's works also marks one stage in a critical activity which has involved the work of artists as dissimilar as Salvador Dali, Ben Nicholson and Karel Appel, using their paintings neither as masterpieces nor as samples of glutinous buffoonery but as pieces in a game. In that game anguish and plea-

Glenn Brown
'The Creeping Flesh'
Oil on Canvas
22" x 20" 1991



sure, works of genius and the unhappy results of over-production meet and do battle. Literal and metaphorical distancing; distaste for materiality; the obsessive desire to correct approaches to art as mere manipulation of what lies close to hand; apocalypticism - isn't an Auerbach head a realistic portrayal of the human figure after acid rain or a Salvador Dali torso that might remain after an atomic holocaust? - even an analysis of the act of work itself. . . . All of these are important elements in a career that proceeds by a process of dogged revision and which resembles the product of dedicated masochism. This should come as no surprise; altering misconceptions takes far longer than the most laborious act of painting.

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Beginning with six identical photographs of a night sky, **ADAM CHODZKO** asked six people to choose one of them and "improve" it by the addition of a single new star, no bigger than the second largest. Each time the series is shown, the number of elements decreases by one while the number of stars in each of the remaining pictures will increase by one. At the end, only a single picture will be exhibited and stars will continue to be added until it is completely white. Called *Plan for the Perfect Night*, it deliberately recalls *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, the movie in which Ray Milland is able to look through everything, so that finally he sees nothing but white. In *The Redistributor*, thirty three glass vessels, seen out of the corner of the eye, seem to protrude from right-angles in the architecture, suggesting a certain

Adam Chadzko

'9605 Km/Hr' (from *Redistributor*)

Manifestation Juice and Lead Crystal

13.5" x 4.75" x 1.25" 1993

