

SHARK INFESTED WATERS

THE SAATCHI COLLECTION OF BRITISH ART IN THE 90s



TEXT BY SARAH KENT

GLENN BROWN

The expressionist quest for immediacy is taken up in the belief that there exists a content beyond convention, a reality beyond representation...the contradictions of expressionism are those of a language that would be immediate, a cultural form that would be natural. Hal Foster ¹

Glenn Brown appropriates the imagery of other painters. His preferred sources are Frank Auerbach, Karel Appel and Salvador Dalí, whose pictures he selects from reproductions in catalogues and books. He is drawn to paintings which feature anguished heads with large, frightened eyes: 'I'm attracted', he says, 'to the Gothic notion of a figure trapped somewhere between the psyche of the model, the artist, the photographer, the printing process and me.' He photographs or photocopies the reproduction and projects or prints the image onto the canvas to act as a guide for the painting he painstakingly renders over the top. Occasionally he works directly from the reproduction, considerably modifying the picture in the process.

Dali-Christ, 1992 (p.113), his version of Dalí's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans*, 1936, is painted on a canvas measuring nine feet by six. Since the original is slightly less than three and a half feet square, the change required major adjustments. By starting top left and working diagonally across the canvas with no guidelines, Brown was not copying so much as elaborating on a theme. This decision was a response to the melodrama of the tortured central figure of Dalí's work, whose impact leads one to imagine a bigger painting.

Reproductions inevitably give imperfect information. They are able to convey little of the painting as a physical object: its size, colour, smell, surface texture and, above all, the quality of the paint handling. You can capture the look of a brush-mark but not its speed, energy and entrapment in the paint, all indications of effort and engagement. Signs of ageing – of dirt and fracture – are also hidden in the printed image.

It is this process of glamorization that interests Brown. Removed from the realm of brute reality into the exotic terrain of the imagination, the painting appears almost hallucinatory, effortless; as though it had made itself. His choice of reproduction is based not on verisimilitude to an original he may not even have seen, but on personal preference. The colours of a reproduction may differ wildly from the originals and Brown modifies them further, to the point where they approach kitsch.

In my catalogue Dalí's painting has a greenish cast which tinges the flesh with

¹ Hal Foster, *Recordings*, Bay Press, 1985, pp.63-4

the sickness of putrefaction. The clouds have a livid opacity and the desert floor is the purplish-brown of dried blood. Over the thigh of the central figure hangs a piece of raw meat the shape of a tongue or internal organ.

Brown's version is slicker and more palatable. He has elongated the central figure, lightened the sky so that clear blue is visible between clouds irradiated by lemon sunshine, and warmed the flesh and floor tones to robust health. One buttock now has a rosy glow as though it had been spanked, the other has the warm highlights of plump fleshiness. He has also enriched the meat hung on the thigh with a tumescent, blood-red energy. Rotting flesh covered in offal is converted into seductive curves inspiring sexual fantasy; titillating melodrama replaces the anguish and nausea of sexual confusion and disgust.

'Dalí's paintings are terrible,' says Brown; 'tacky, vulgar, gruesome, full of adolescent self-loathing. That's why I like them!' He relives, by proxy, the painful passions of adolescence and represents them with the glamour of an Athena reproduction, sanitized into exotic spectacle.

Brown's fascination with Frank Auerbach stems from 'the heavy melancholy in the paintings and also his nasty streak. The myth of the tortured artist is very strong. I was brought up on films like *Lust For Life*, the Hollywood version of Van Gogh's life. Although I don't believe in it, I am still hooked on the equation between creativity and desperation.'

Van Gogh has become the archetype of the crazed genius or the 'man possessed', as he is described in a leaflet at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Griselda Pollock has shown that the myth became popular soon after the Second World War,² when Jackson Pollock was developing the drip technique that allowed an unmediated flow of feeling from psyche to canvas: a literal and metaphoric outpouring. The Van Gogh story, or its glamorized version, obviously matched the mood of the moment.

In ecstatic, quasi-religious prose the American critic Harold Rosenberg affirmed the mythic dimension of Abstract Expressionism. 'What matters always is the relation contained in the act,' he wrote; 'the new movement is, with the majority of painters, essentially a religious movement...it attempts to initiate a new moment in which the painter will realize his total personality.' Rosenberg's affirmation indicates the degree to which reverence for expressionist painting depends on belief in the unique relationship between artist and canvas: 'The result has been the creation of private myths. The tension of the private myth is the content of every painting of this vanguard.'³ To sceptics, however, this tension might not be visible.

Arguments against Rosenberg's claims are legion. 'Unmediated expression is a philosophical impossibility,' insists Paul de Man.⁴ According to Jacques Lacan, the unconscious is structured along the principles of language, so there can be no

² Griselda Pollock in a lecture at the National Gallery, February 1992

³ Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters' in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, 1968, pp.569, 570

⁴ Paul de Man, 'Criticism and Crisis', quoted by Hal Foster in *Recordings*, op.cit., p.59

unmediated inner life and no expression innocent of its cultural context. Roland Barthes summed it up with the jaundiced remark that 'sincerity is merely a second-degree Image- repertoire.' ⁵ If these caveats are right, no claims can be made for painting on the grounds of emotional authenticity, and Expressionism becomes a style like any other, with no monopoly on emotional truth and profundity.

Brown's paintings are like an act of mourning and expiation for the loss of meaning and affect which results from these conclusions. His appropriation of Frank Auerbach and Karel Appel, a member of the postwar French COBRA group, is tinged with the pathos of nostalgia and with sympathy for the failure of a misguided enterprise.

Both these artists employ brush strokes laden with thick paint to conjure rapidly the presence of a solitary figure whose generalized features convey fear, pain and vulnerability. They are ciphers rather than individuals, symbols of suffering humanity. 'I find it hard to believe that Appel took his heads seriously,' says Brown. 'They are so obviously comical. I give my paintings science fiction titles, like 'The Body Snatchers', to emphasize this absurdity. Auerbach's portraits are like cartoons. He has a set way of doing the eyes, nose and mouth with brushmarks that he has perfected over the years. He copies himself, everyone does. The notion of self-parody and plagiarism is in everyone's work; Picasso did second-rate Picassos.'

Brown closes in on the heads, frequently enlarging them against an out-of-focus ground so as to dramatize the anguish of the isolated figure. He may turn the image on its side to enhance its existential agony. The paint surfaces of the original churn with raw emotion, the speed and energy of the brushmarks giving the impression that the paint has scarcely had time to coalesce into an image. By contrast, Brown's surfaces are as slickly uniform as a photograph. Working with very fine brushes and paint thinned with linseed oil, he painstakingly simulates the excited brushmarks and thick, juicy paint of the originals, but eliminates all traces of his own hand by lightly brushing the surface with a dry brush. This self-erasure is an ironic act of resignation to the fact that since the brushmark is no longer seen to be a unique manifestation of feeling, artists have been robbed of a cherished myth. Stroking the lifeless image is like caressing the cheek of a corpse; a meditation on separation and loss.

Brown's pictures resemble reproductions printed on canvas to imitate the painted surface, while being completely devoid of texture, movement or vitality. As though to compensate for this inertia, he heightens the colours. The sombre browns and blacks preferred by Auerbach and the torrid violence of Appel's palette are replaced by seductive rainbow hues, reminiscent of Gerhard Richter's dragged abstractions. The paint surface is dead, but the body has been decorated with a livid semblance of vitality. Brown's paintings are clones – Stepford wives, their external appearance smoothly immaculate, their spirits evacuated. A

⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Deliberations', quoted by Hal Foster, op.cit., p.75

profound rift is opened up between author and image, appearance and meaning.

The American artist Sherry Levine achieved a comparable dislocation by re-photographing and signing Walker Evans' photographs and re-presenting paintings by Egon Schiele and Franz Marc. But although they prise apart artist and product and query notions of authorship, her appropriations do not invalidate the original images. Brown, on the other hand, makes the paintings that he copies seem like rhetorical acts of self-delusion.

In order to strip the brushmark of overblown claims made on its behalf, Desmond Morris provided some chimpanzees with paper, paint and the opportunity to create a masterpiece. In his most ironic undertaking to date, Brown has simulated the chimpanzee pictures. Working behind his back with his left hand, in an attempt to make marks beyond his control, he made a bid to achieve the unmediated expression of childhood. The loss of that unselfconscious spontaneity is, I suspect, the real sadness which informs the melancholy humour of Glenn Brown's meticulously controlled paintings.

SIMON GALLERY

Simon Gallery lives on the fifth floor overlooking the Limehouse Basin where the air is saturated with damp and the rooftops of London are visible through a veil of moisture.

His paintings are about light, air, weather and views over the city. The film of cloudy white which envelops many of his canvases evokes misty days, pollution haze and, for those old enough to remember, the pea-soupers that brought befuddled traffic to a halt in post-war London. The pallor of *E14SE10*, 1992 (p.118), whose title refers to the extent of the view from Gallery's window, suggests flurries of snow. But the image also seems retrospective, as though it were ensconced in memory. His grey-buff surfaces are the colour of concrete and Portland stone as well as of fog and river mist. These paintings are not simply cityscapes; their relationship to the environment is more complex and more conceptual.

Gallery used to draw the views from his balcony, but the building fragments now visible in his compositions – the angle of a roof, the edge of a wall, the line of a chimney or the curve of an architrave – are not records of specific buildings and locations so much as ciphers, generalized evocations of the city's fabric. Architectural details play an integral part in structuring images whose function is

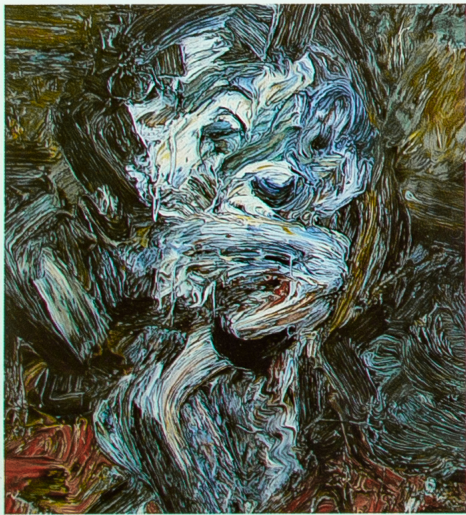
GLENN BROWN



after 'Soft Construction with Boiled Beans' (1936) by Salvador Dalí. By kind permission of DUMART PRO ARTE BV for this. Copyright © Glenn Brown 1992

Dali-Christ 1992 oil on canvas 274 x 183cm / 108 x 72"

GLENN BROWN



top **The Day the World Turned Auerbach** 1992 oil on canvas 56 x 50.5cm / 22 x 20"

bottom **The Creeping Flesh** 1991 oil on canvas 56 x 50.5cm / 22 x 20"

GLENN BROWN



top **Mad Love** 1991 oil on canvas 61 x 73.5cm / 24 x 29"



bottom **The Body Snatchers** 1991 oil on canvas 61 x 73.5cm / 24 x 29"

GLENN BROWN



Ornamental Despair (Painting for Ian Curtis) After Chris Foss 1994 oil on canvas 201 x 300cm / 79 x 118"

SIMON CALLERY



Double 6 1993 oil on linen 170 x 191cm / 67 x 75"