

An abstract painting featuring a dense composition of splatters and blotches in various shades of blue, green, and white against a black background. The splatters vary in size and shape, creating a dynamic and energetic visual field. The colors are layered, with some appearing more prominent than others. The overall effect is one of spontaneity and movement.

Abstract Painting
Once Removed

Glenn Brown

Born 1966, Hexham, Northumberland, England
Lives and works in London



Glenn Brown is not interested in painting, photographic reproductions, or sculpture per se, but instead seems more interested in the in-between states of being, the fallout when a real object is translated from one form to another. In his paintings he draws on printed reproductions to create airless, flattened versions of either gestural, painterly Modernist abstractions, hyperreal or surreal images by Salvador Dalí, or science-fiction illustrations such as those by Chris Foss. This exhibition focuses on the work of Brown's painting and sculpture based on the British Expressionist Frank Auerbach, whose thickly impastoed, aggressively rendered abstract portraits are considered masterpieces of Modern British painting. As the artist explains, "Auerbach's works are full of the residue of the 'Artist' making the painting through the brushstrokes in a Modernist tradition, an approach described by one exhibition title as 'The Hard Won Image.'"¹

Brown is especially interested in Auerbach's portraits, and the shift that occurs when the flesh-and-blood subject is transformed into paint by the artist's hand, then again when the painting is photographed, and again when the reproduction is published in a book. The printed versions from which Brown works are always several steps removed from the initial encounter between portraitist and portrayed. Brown describes the betrayal: "The subject, the figure, became helpless, displaced, and lost between Auerbach's interpretation, the photograph, the printed page, and my interpretation. As portraits, [my Auerbach works] represent a hopelessly schizophrenic state, with no single author, so the artist's model is viewed from no one perspective."²

Brown's "surrogate paintings," carefully rendered in sharp realist focus from reproductions of Auerbach's work, are disturbing displacements of what our eyes would lead us to expect,

the physical trace of thick paint dragged (by Auerbach) across the canvas having been replaced by a delicate rendering and subtle colored glazes; it is as if, in Brown's words, he has "ironed the wrinkles out of Auerbach's painting."³ Not only does Brown drain the impastoed paint of its passion, he also refocuses the portrait; using shallow photographic space,⁴ he seeks to make "paintings of people made in paint, rather than a portrait of a painting. . . . I play around with what would be the focal length, so the head is in focus and the background is not. Returning the subject to its original perspective, the head gets some depth."⁵ Working against Auerbach's Modernist flattening of a dimensional figure into the picture plane, Brown produces instead a near-photographic likeness that carries a different kind of flatness. He seeks means that are fairly invisible, citing Dalí's statement that his paintings are like handmade photographs of visions that could be captured in no other way.⁶

Brown eventually realized that the next step toward giving Auerbach's heads a new dimensionality was for them to move beyond both Auerbach's Modernist picture plane and his own quasi-photographic plane of focus by entering the viewer's space—as sculptures. The astonishing results are shocking in their violent beauty, whether lying on the floor literally, like a severed head,⁷ or trapped in a vitrine like a biological specimen. We cannot help but circle, staring, seeking orientation or an image from the painterly mass.

The construction of the sculpture is quite simple: plaster is applied over a chicken-wire armature, then thickly and aggressively painted. While Auerbach painted the figure from only one angle, in Brown's sculptures we can continue around the full 360-degree head, much of which the artist must invent. Brown's work differs from other Expressionist sculpture, its closest parallel perhaps being painter Willem de Kooning's

left:

You Never Touch My Skin in the Way You Did and You've Even Changed the Way You Kiss Me, 1994

Oil on canvas
60 x 48 inches
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis;
Butler Family Fund, 1994

opposite:

These Days, 1994

Plaster, acrylic and oil paint, and chicken wire
8 x 9½ x 8 inches
Saatchi Collection, London

experiments with Expressionist figures. In those bronzes, however, especially in the intimate maquette scale, we sense the fingers of de Kooning the sculptor making mass, while Brown's forms are based on the way a brushstroke defines a surface. As with his paintings, Brown makes his sculptures by looking at reproductions in books, "with the paint colors mimicking bad color printing"⁸—yet another step away from the original. "Looking at pictures of artworks in books requires the brain to reconstitute the original from the meta-state of the reproductions; I want the viewer to again reconstitute the painting from this meta-state. It should not be like looking at a real sculpture."⁹

By painting or sculpting second-generation photographic reproductions of paintings, Brown's exploration of Modernism's Expressionist phase forces us to reconsider the ways we read and understand original works of art and their re-presentation in reproductions once, twice, and three times removed from the original subject. Brown's compelling but contradictory paintings and sculptures interrogate the methods and meanings of Modernist art, a key practice defining the Postmodern era.

1. Glenn Brown, telephone conversation with the author, July 4, 1998.

2. Glenn Brown, interview with Marcelo Spinelli, in *Glenn Brown* (Hexham: Northumberland County Library, and London: Karsten Schubert, 1996), pp. 5–6.

3. Glenn Brown, telephone conversation with the author, July 4, 1998.

4. In this context, it is interesting to compare Brown's backgrounds with Uta Barth's Ground series photographs, included in this exhibition (pp. 46–7).

5. Glenn Brown, telephone conversation with the author, July 4, 1998.

6. *Ibid.*

7. The artist said he likes that they can be read as props from a horror film, and to one he's even added a bloody neck.

8. Glenn Brown, telephone conversation with the author, July 4, 1998.

9. *Ibid.*

