



# THIS IS MODERN ART

MATTHEW COLLINGS



FROM THE CHANNEL FOUR SERIES



Glenn Brown in his studio 1998

the original. Now all the wriggling sheens, arbitrary lights and darks, and new colours of the reproduction from which the new image is being painted, are details too.

He has painted copies of Frank Auerbach and Salvador Dalí as well, and de Kooning and the works of a 70s cult science fiction illustrator. He gives the re-done versions new titles which are often grimly comic, or camp, like the titles of 70s cult horror films. For example, *The Living Dead* is the new title for a re-done painting by Auerbach, which had originally been titled just with the initials of Auerbach's sitter. But now Auerbach's gouged expressionist surface has a new meaning, of creeping mutant flesh. Another painting is Brown's upside down copy of a beautiful face painted by Fragonard. Its new title is a line from a depressing Joy Division song – *Searched Hard For You And Your Special Ways*. Perhaps it is appropriate that this song was recorded in 1980 – the dawn of the dead.

'I'm just using the contemporary landscape,' Brown says, about his use of art that was made originally by someone else.

His studio is a conventional one, with lots of tiny brushes and tubes of paint and little jars of turps and medium. And his work as an artist is not mechanical or without feeling. Or it may be a bit mechanical but there's a definite feeling. It is the feeling of being alone in a studio, taking a very long time to paint something, living an unhealthy inward-turned, isolated life with long stretches of boredom. The feeling is expressed right there in the exaggerated hyper-detail of the brought-back-to-life paintings.

'The exaggeration comes from the colour. It's hyped-up colour, so it appears drug-induced, acidic. In my best paintings the colour is almost as if the painting's gone off. It's decaying. It was fresh once.'

It's an odd new nothingness. His paintings are so full you'd think this would be the last place to find it. But they're full of something that already exists perfectly OK somewhere else. It's the opposite of Robert Ryman, for example, who makes much out of little – the opposite turned inside out as well and with all the oxygen taken out. On he works, a figure at the end of a white space, painting a painting that doesn't need to exist again.

#### Very new monochromes

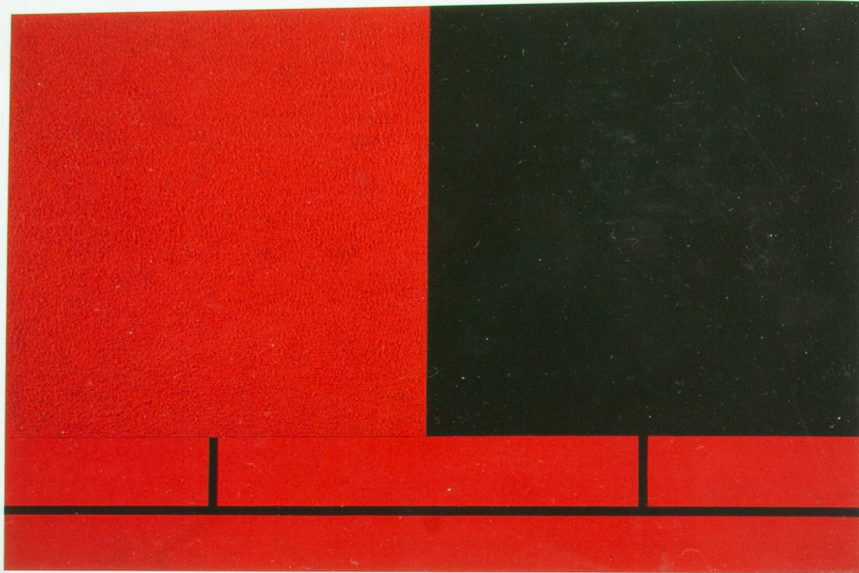
In another studio, Jason Martin paints a monochrome. The canvas is huge. There are many hundreds of pounds worth of oil paint on it. The paint was scooped out of big tins of different colours and then mixed up in a big plastic bucket to make a mass of strong deep blue. Then the mass was knifed onto the white canvas in loops and the loops were smeared out. They had to be plastered over the white so it would be covered more or less evenly with no bald patches. Then a long length of metal, like a metal comb, was dragged across the surface of the paint, scoring deep grooves in it. It was dragged back and forth again and again. For hours. It was exhausting to see it. After that, the painting was finished. And now there it stands. The formerly gloopy matter is now a single balletic movement of matter, extremely satisfyingly grooved, in a wave movement, across a wide deep surface.

'What you see is what you see' was a maxim of Minimalism in the 60s. There wasn't anything other than what you saw, was the idea. So what you saw had to be very particular and you had to be particularly careful to see it in the right way and not be looking for something else, because Minimalism wasn't anarchic and free but rigid and with lots of rules. At least, that's what was thought after a while, when a reaction against it set in. But now some of the rules are fine again. And they can be mixed up with other rules too.

The surface of this new monochrome is a record as well as an expanse of inert matter – the movement of the metal comb records and documents the movement

#### Glenn Brown

b Hexham (England), 1966  
Glenn Brown studied for his MA at Goldsmiths, London in 1990–2, and his witty theoretical work reflects the intellectual aesthetic emerging from this influential institution at the time. Appropriating and ironically renaming iconic paintings from the canon of Modern art – Auerbach, de Kooning, Karel Appel – he presents exact copies using a tiny brush, which reduces their textures to a completely flat surface, like a colour photograph. This playful enquiry into authenticity, authorship, and celebrity hit the nail directly on the head when in 1994, in the exhibition 'Here and Now' at the Serpentine Gallery, his works were excluded from the show when the Dalí Foundation threatened to take legal action over the unauthorized use of their images. Brown began by making *trompe l'oeil* representations of the moon's surface, but found the results 'too rich in romantic meaning'. In recent works such as *Jesus: The Living Dead (after Adolf Schaller)*, 1997–8, he avoids this problem by reproducing on a billboard scale a scientific rendering of a planetary surface by the American commercial artist Adolf Schaller.



**Peter Halley**  
Glowing and Burnt-Out Cells  
with Conduit 1982

### The problem-maker in your head

Post-Modern art of the 70s and 80s was an art where all the old meanings were drained out. It was art of radical draining leaving a lot of baffling blanks. It was nothing like Picasso but very much like *Pablo Picasso*. Lots of new art forms came out which just seemed to recycle older art forms. Even Non-Objective abstract art made a reappearance. But the meaning was always somewhere other than what seemed to be right there in front of your eyes. Just as it was with recycled Rothkos.

Abstract red squares in the paintings of Peter Halley, for example, were not the Void any more, or a peasant in two dimensions, but only cynical blanks or psychological prison cells. Recycled Op Art swirls in Philip Taaffe's paintings were not seductive visual explosions like a Modern version of Impressionism, as they had been in 1962, but signifiers of the death of meaning and the end of history. (In the 90s they would be recycled again by Chris Ofili and then they would be recycled Philip Taaffes as well as Bridget Rileys.) And Seduction itself was a menacing abstract force that now ruled the world, controlling and manipulating highbrows and barbarians alike, in a unified environment of rising psychic poison. Apparent meanings were wrong and real meanings were baffling, because the real meanings

were anti-canonical and most people weren't even sure what the canon meant yet, let alone the anti-canon. Meaning meant nothing and nothing mattered. But now Nothing mattered in a traumatized Post-Punk way, not in a spiritual or celestial or tragic or even Minimalist negative space way.

And not even in a revolutionary way, since there was nothing to revolt against – not even yourself, in a 60s or 70s self-awareness way – because the problem was not you but the problem-maker in your head.

'Phew!' everyone thought at last – 'What about having our meanings back?' But they couldn't have them back, because they didn't mean the same any more. The old meanings were dead meanings. To bring them back would be to bring back zombies.

### Depressing joy division

In a bright white studio in East London, Glenn Brown, an artist in his 30s, who sucked in 80s blankness like mother's milk when he was at art school in that decade, paints a stunningly detailed copy of the nineteenth-century German Romantic painter Arnold Boecklin's *Island of the Dead*. There seem to be even more details than in



**Glenn Brown**  
Searched Hard For You And  
Your Special Ways 1995

**Peter Halley**  
b New York, NY(USA) 1953  
Peter Halley has been called the 'chief theorist' of Neo Geo, a cool, impersonal tendency that emerged in New York in the mid-1980s as a reaction against the emotionalism of Neo-Expressionism. He cites his inspiration as a combination of growing up in Manhattan as it developed into a grid of office towers, to the influence of Albers at the Phillips Academy in Andover, to the New York School of the 1950s, and the works of Guston and Balcellsari. Characterised by Day-Glo colours and synthetic Roll-a-Tex surfaces, his large geometrical compositions are parodic, Post-Modern critiques of transcendental artists like Ryman, Newman and Rothko, whose evocative forms he translates into mechanistic conduits ('I've taken Newman's zip and made it into plumbing,' he has said). But these schematic diagrams aim to put the content back into formalism. Not simply abstract images, they are representations of spatial experience, showing that abstraction can also function on figurative, political and symbolic levels. And while the recurrent presence of cells in his work equates ideal geometry with prison, the Day-Glo conduits and arteries suggest communication and energy, piped into these systems of isolation and control.