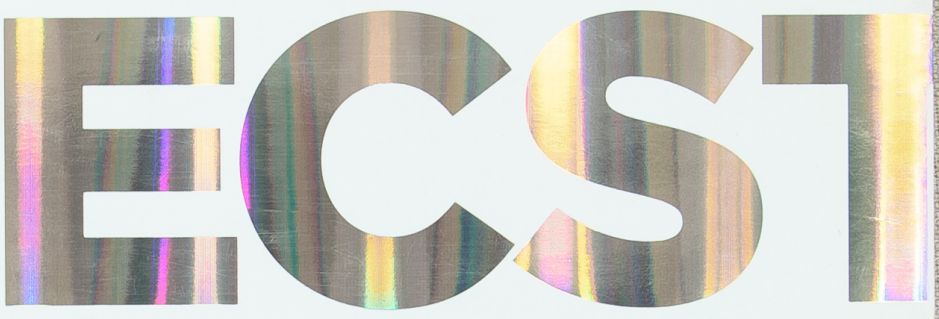
ECST

left
Death Disco, 2004
right
Anaesthesia, 2001
opposite
Led Zeppelin, 2005

Glenn Brown's paintings embody a contemporary sense of the uncanny. An aesthetic derivation of the Burkean sublime, the uncanny emerged in the late nineteenth century among many emerging phobias and neuroses. According to Sigmund Freud, the uncanny results when something that once seemed familiar transforms into something markedly unfamiliar, from the *heimlich* to the *unheimlich*. This estrangement from reality is often represented in literature by contrasting a secure and comfortable interior with the fearful invasion of an alien presence, as in Edgar Allan Poe's eerie tales and Charles Baudelaire's swarming crowds.

Brown's richly colored and detailed paintings create an uncanny effect by taking something familiar—a genre scene or old master portrait—and, through formal manipulation, creating something startlingly alien. Brown makes paintings that specifically reference or visually quote from a wide range of sources, including portraits by Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Salvador Dalí and the fantastical images of science-fiction artist Chris Foss. Brown transforms these images into paintings that are at once hauntingly familiar and completely new: "I start with a vague idea of the kind of painting I want to make, and I do small sketches...more or less determin[ing] the size of the painting, the colour, the type of background, etc. Then I spend some time looking through books and catalogues to find a painting that fits my idea as closely as possible."[1] Often drawing multiple sources into a single work, Brown exaggerates and reworks them until they become their eerie doubles: "I'm rather like Dr. Frankenstein, constructing paintings out of the residue or dead parts of other artists' work. I hope to create a sense of strangeness by bringing together examples of the way the best historic and modern-day artists have depicted their personal sense of the world. I see their worlds from multiple or schizophrenic perspectives."[2]

In *Anaesthesia* (2001), Brown based the dog on Sir Edwin Landseer's *Dignity and Impudence* (1839); but in Brown's version, the kennel, floor, and chain have been erased and the original color scheme has changed into one of moldy greens and rotten browns. Likewise, in *Death Disco* (2004) the shepherdess from Rembrandt van Rijn's *Flora* (1634) has been elongated, obscuring any signs of her pregnancy, and the bright yellow background pops next to the blue swirls that articulate her form. Brown also gave her bloodshot eyes and an empty stare, in addition to erasing the crook she clutched in the original. Brown toys not only with the content of the work, but with the handling of the paint. Unlike the source works, his paintings have an almost completely flat, gleaming surface, with little to no visible texture. Using the slightest of brushes, Brown sets out to undermine the viewer's psychological and technical expectations for painting.

Brown's titles often reference late 1970s and 80s British pop culture, making the link between the title and the image seem obscure or nonexistent to anyone but the artist. *Anaesthesia* was inspired by the lyrics of the 1980 Joy Division song "Colony" and *Death Disco* comes from a Public Image Ltd. song of 1979. In trying to recall the source for Brown's works, one becomes aware that what was once familiar is now unfamiliar. As Brown said, "I am not happy until I have disoriented viewers by disrupting their perspective and their perceived place in the world."[3]

Gloria Sutton

NOTES

1. Glenn Brown, interview with Rochelle Steiner, in *Glenn Brown*, exh. cat. (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2004), 96.
2. Ibid., 95.
3. Ibid., 99.

Glenn Brown

b. 1966, Hexham, England
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