

100 WORDS  
OF ART  
THAT WILL  
DEFINE  
OUR AGE  
KELLY  
GROVIER

Thames & Hudson

013 Sex (2003) GLENN BROWN

British artist Glenn Brown would rather you didn't recognize him on the street. For the past ten years, when asked by publishers or publicists for a photograph of himself to appear alongside his work in books or catalogues, Brown has invariably only permitted instead the reproduction of the enigmatically entitled *Sex*, a portrait he painted in 2003 of what appears to be a decomposing sixteenth-century courtier. Refusing to pose for photographs, Brown has explained to interviewers that the reason he remains visually evasive is to keep alive the possibility that any one of his portraits could contain elements of self-portraiture, a potential that would be forfeited if his face were more widely known. For Brown, it seems, preserving the mystery of his own features enlivens every one of his works with added intrigue, as though there existed some mystical continuum between the texture of life and the texture of art. This carefully managed invisibility allows Brown to assume in the minds of those who view his work an endless array of possible identities, unrestricted to time or place. In a sense, every work is a self-portrait, and none is.

The instinct to operate utterly incognito is only complicated in Brown's case by his ceaseless borrowing of

artistic subjects from the past, which the viewer feels he or she has encountered countless times before on the half-remembered walls of half-remembered museums. But in Brown's hands, the familiar pose and countenance of a stock Elizabethan sitter, as in the case of *Sex*, undergo an unsettling transformation of temperament and tone, the refined fabric of the decorative ruff and the figure's supple complexion beginning to dissolve into a swirl of acidic decomposition. The skin's sickly hue and spectral film fogging the sightless eyes suggest a slow unravelling of substance and sense, held together only by the conventions of artistic posture. The eerily absent stare recalls the silvery sockets of Modigliani's unpupiled portraits.

What can be gleaned about an individual when gazing into the face of a work of art? That portraits are never portraits of the sitter but portraits of the artist's absent eyes, jittering in a timeless void, conjuring faces from the artificial detritus of art history? Perhaps this is the likeness of Brown after all, a prototype for the perennial painter who ages, Dorian Gray-like, only through his works. Glenn Brown would rather you didn't recognize him on the street but in the far-away stare of every portrait you have ever seen.

Glenn Brown, *Sex*, 2003. Oil on panel,  
726 × 851 × 2.9 cm (49% × 33% × 1% in.)

