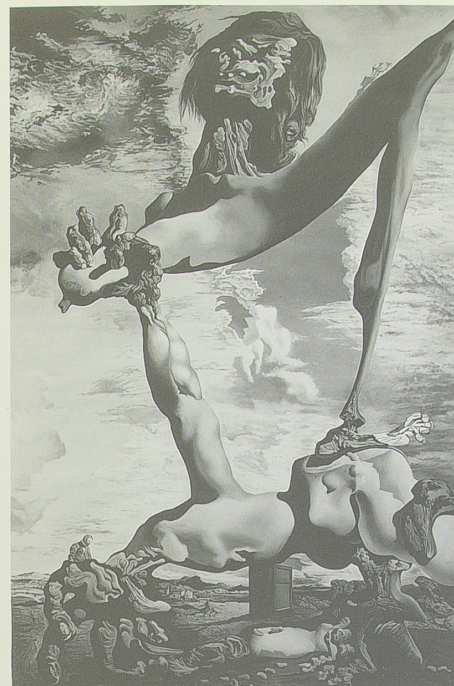


YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS V

GLENN BROWN KEITH COVENTRY
HADRIAN PIGOTT KERRY STEWART

S A A T C H I G A L L E R Y



DALI-CHRIST 1992

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), his version of Dalí's 'Soft Construction with Boiled Beans' (1936) is painted on a canvas measuring 9' x 6'. Since the original is slightly less than 3'6" 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, 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 brushmark but not its speed, energy and entrapment in the paint; indications of effort and engagement. Signs of ageing – of dirt and fracture – are also hidden in the printed image.

It's this process of glamorisation 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 printed colours 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 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 self-loathing.

'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 passions of adolescence and represents them with the glamour of an Athena

reproduction; sanitised 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.'⁽²⁾

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 World War II⁽³⁾ 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 glamorised 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 revelation 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.'⁽⁴⁾ 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.⁽⁵⁾ According to Jacques Lacan, the unconscious is structured along the principles of language, so there can be no 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.'⁽⁶⁾ 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 result 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 expressionists employ brush strokes laden with thick paint to rapidly conjure the presence of a solitary figure whose generalised features convey fear, pain and vulnerability. These 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 emphasise 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; even Picasso did second-rate Picassos.'

Brown closes in on the heads, frequently enlarging them against an out-of-focus ground so as to dramatise the anguish of the isolated figure. He may turn the image on its side to enhance its existential anguish. The original paint surfaces churn with raw emotion; the speed and energy of the brushmarks give the impression that the paint has scarcely had time to coalesce into an image.

In contrast, Brown's surfaces are slow and 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 stroking 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 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 representing 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 ridiculous – rhetorical acts of self-delusion.

Titles such as 'The Creeping Flesh', 'The Body Snatchers' and 'Decline and Fall', encourage one to see the original subjects as sci-fi monsters or horror-film ghouls. 'Entertainment' (1995) is more like a carnival grotesque – a leering Ensor skull in a flowery hat – than the melancholic Auerbach portrait on which it is based. The brushmarks have become so fat that they seem like independent elements – sausages piled up to resemble a figure, like a fantastic Arcimboldo head.

Auerbach loads his pictures with such a thickness of paint that the oil has been known to slither off the canvas. 'Never Forever' (1994) lies on the floor as though it had fallen out of an Auerbach painting and, freed from the constraints of the two dimensional surface, had expanded into three dimensions. The contorted features of the plaster head are coated with pigment whose density and colouring resemble the Auerbach original. But the head has its throat cut, as though it had been murdered. Having been 'executed', the portrait is reborn as a gruesome, gothic sculpture. 'Working in the studio for an unhealthy amount of time, late at night', attracted Brown to the melancholic imagination of Chris Foss, the science fiction illustrator. His hyper-real depictions of deep space reminded Brown of the apocalyptic paintings

of John Martin, the Victorian visionary who depicted 'The Last Judgement' (1853) as a raging inferno.

In 'The Pornography of Death (Painting for Ian Curtis after Chris Foss)' (1995), meteorites, floating through the blue expanses of deep space, are portrayed as rugged islands – the bedrock on which a fabulous, futuristic city is built. By enlarging the image, Brown enhances the romance of the original and lends it a Biblical authority.

Illustrations accorded the status of paintings, paintings remade to resemble reproductions, portraits mutating into sculptures – Glenn Brown's 'genetic engineering' eliminates difference and, by offering everything equal status, creates black comedy where previously there was angst, neurosis and melancholy escapism.

Text by Sarah Kent

FOOTNOTES:

1. Hal Foster *Recodings* Bay Press 1985, pp 63-4.
2. All comments by the artists were made in conversation with the author.
3. Griselda Pollock in a lecture at the National Gallery, February 1992.
4. Harold Rosenberg 'The American Action Painters' in Herschel B. Chipp *Theories of Modern Art* University of California Press 1968 pp 569, 570.
5. Paul de Man 'Criticism and Crisis' quoted by Hal Foster in *Recodings* Bay Press 1985 p59.
6. Roland Barthes 'Deliberations' quoted by Hal Foster op cit p 75.