



**“ Dear Painter, „
paint me...”**

Painting the Figure since late Picabia

Centre Pompidou
Kunsthalle Wien
Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

Glenn Brown

Sabine Folie

Thus we do not live our own lives but rather those of the dead.

Oscar Wilde

The beautiful incorporates a feeling for what is holy. It surrounds an object with an aura of invulnerability, establishes the taboo of its injury. I am strongly attracted to this object whereas awe, as an equivalent countervailing force, holds me back from it. Interrupted in my movements, I stand there as if rooted to the ground. The beautiful is detachment.

Peter Schjeldahl

Since Glenn Brown first encountered the portrait *Head of JYM* (1973) in 1991, Frank Auerbach, the author of the work, has haunted Brown's reservoir of imagery. But not only Auerbach—Georg Baselitz, Philip Guston, Salvador Dalí, and even illustrators such as Chris Foss, have also been quoted in his work, blended and transformed until something entirely new has been created. The scope of the subject matter which is subjected to this process ranges from large-scale science-fiction paintings or portraits to sculptures, which are also portraits, translated, as it were, into two dimensions.

He starts with photocopied works of the great masters, first painting copies of them in *trompe-l'œil*, and then creates a metamorphosis by merging different subjects by several painters at once, as well as mass media products borrowed from film and literature. His science-fiction paintings of lunar landscapes, fantastic cities on

SF: When one looks at your paintings—in particular your "portraits" rather than your "science-fiction" paintings the first source of confusion comes from the kind of subject or person you are presenting to the viewer. A closer scrutinizing of the painting—its surface, the application of color—provides more insight into

what is a rather disturbing mixture of visual information. There are many different elements pulling the viewer in various directions that might lead to totally opposite interpretations: title, subject, surface, pictorial attitude. Your paintings always seem to present a sort of puzzle or enigma. This is of course intrinsic to a "con-

meteorites whizzing about in outer space, dark expanses of nothingness executed in the *trompe-l'œil* technique are themselves translated into portraiture.

The distinction between "high" and "low" culture is immaterial. What counts is the result, which is intended to disturb viewers, keep them at an uncomfortable distance, astound them and alienate them. Black humor, the vile and obscene, cliché and ugliness, the sweet and the beautiful, rot and decay: these are all aspects of the artist's imaginary world. He seduces our senses in order to inoculate us against "sensory deprivation", and thus keeps our eyes moving.

His sources of inspiration are legion: the great masters and, more trivially, film and literature, or the hybrid sensualism and decadence of Blake, Böcklin or Füssli (Fuseli). His predilection for the sinister, the dark, for "nocturnal creatures", decay, the black side of human nature reveals a clear affinity with the aesthetic of the "gothic". Many of Brown's pictures are dedicated to Ian Curtis, the haunted hero of the gothic punk band Joy Division, who died young: dark, melancholy, delicate and immovable, floating alone in outer space.

Like a vampire Brown sucks blood from the myriad sources of inspiration feeding his imagination in order to transcend time as a "soulless" creature and to contemplate his work from a distant horizon: a reflective, cool, passionate and full-blooded painter.

(translated from the German by Joan Clough)

ceptual" or intellectual painterly behavior. Let's begin to discuss your paintings first in terms of surface. Should one only encounter your paintings through photographic reproduction, it is likely that your allusions to impasto, color, corporeality, and texture would be missed. This is

especially striking in your "Auerbach" works since your paintings are not thick and daubed with earnest gesture like the originals. Your "Auerbachs" are flat, totally flat, though extremely elaborate. The viewer is shocked by this deception, betrayed by the *trompe l'oeil*.

If you know the original Auerbach paintings, you have the sensation of a reversed process regarding notions of proximity and distance: the original Auerbachs gain corporeality as you get physically closer to the painting, while your "Auerbach" paintings can only suggest texture and corporeality if one looks at them from a distance. From these observations, I have a few questions: What is your conception of the bodily involvement of the painter in the process of painting? The notions of style (the personal, instinctive style of a painter) and manner (an acquired skill, dexterity) have a deep impact on your conception of painting. Can you speak about these notions?

GB: Why do I paint the way I do? I'm not a very good Modernist. I did try, I read my Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, and I even enjoyed it. But life is too short to be guided by only one orthodoxy. Modernism still dominates visual thinking, so it is difficult to negate. I fell head over heels in love with painting, all of it, for better or for worse. 1000 years of art history stood before me, suggesting every mode of thinking possible, but which one to choose? The sad answer is that I chose to choose none of them, not fundamentally anyway. I have different "bodies of work" - the sculptures, photographs, portraits and science fiction paintings - and each follows a different orthodoxy. In the "Auerbach" and other portraits you speak of, which is perhaps the dominant body within my work, my bodily involvement is as voyeur. It sounds dreadful, but I am perhaps only here in spirit. I could partake in the pleasures of the paint, but I prefer the invisible hand of the dematerialized artist, making dematerialized fake brush marks. I looked at the history of painting and couldn't see why expression should

be aligned only with the brush mark. Though painters toy with it, the genuine is something that artists are too in awe of. High Modernism turned the hand of the artist into a cliché. However, I like clichés. I like portraits and flowers and still lifes and *trompe l'oeil* and the story of Van Gogh cutting off his ear. These things involve sentiment, and sentiment, like Steven Spielberg movies, makes me cry. For some strange reason along with the 80 % of the population these things make me feel real; genuine brush marks generally don't. Skill is another bad word, not even in the Modernist lexicon. To this day artists who show skill, craft or pride in their work hold themselves up to ridicule, or worse still, mediocrity; it's cool not to care. I have this vision of some collector holding up some piece of junk and announcing how many hundred thousand dollars he paid for it, all to rapturous applause. Don't get me wrong, a great deal of that junk would have me applauding too, its just that the more junky the junk, and exotically degenerate it looks, the more in control of his world the collector feels when he buys it. Degenerate art has become another dominant cliché. It may not sound like it, but I adore the act of painting, it's so extraordinarily subtle, it is something you can never be too skilled at. Color and its myriad of combinations always amazes me. To paint the expression of a face and to change that expression, from happy to sad by one minuscule change in the shadow of an eye, makes one never want to do anything else. Though it is difficult to see how the paintings are made, and what exactly one is looking at, it's not rocket science, it's just paint. The enigma is, why do I fall for clichés when I know how bad they are?

SF: It seems to me that you are a fairly good Modernist painter in respect to your self-referential method of investigation concerning the means of painting. At first glance, you are not referring to an immediate model or a subject, but to the sitter or subject of another painter who is part of another tradition, and

who subsequently becomes your model or antagonist. Frank Auerbach says: "As soon as I become consciously aware of what the paint is doing my involvement with the painting is weakened. Paint is at its most eloquent when it is a by-product of some corporeal, spatial, developing imaginative concept, a creative identification with the subject. I would no more fix my mind on the character of paint than if maybe an alchemist could fix his on mechanical chemistry." Auerbach works with sitters with whom he imposes a sort of intimate, sometimes pragmatic, yet still intensive dialogue. If we take Auerbach at his word, this dialogue leads to a certain formal shape determined by many subconscious aspects. The dialogue is intended to last a long time; sometimes a painting takes years to finish. This sensual and psychological approach seems to be the opposite of your starting point. In the Modernist tradition, a mature painter is not allowed to return to a bourgeois or even bohemian relationship between the painter and model. Instead, as you have already said about your work, you are a voyeur. This voyeurism is enacted by appropriating the subjects or sitters of other painters (such as Auerbach, Appel, Baselitz, Fragonard, Guston, de Kooning). Why those figures in particular? Why transform them into something new? To use a cliché, this appropriation process seems to be a continuous oscillation between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—your paintings seem to be the result of a painful, frivolous, comic and liberating process of transformation. This seems like a defiantly anti-Modernist gesture. Is there a relationship between you and the model even if it is mediated by this complicated process of appropriation? A kind of "love affair" between you and this mute object of desire? There is also a question of time it takes for you to make a painting, to "release" it into the world, for the eyes of other people. Can you speak about this "gestation" time? Can you describe further this logic of "transformation" in your paintings, perhaps by speaking about the

almost blasphemous titles that is part of their transformation, such as *Seligspredung* or *Ride with the Devil*, *Sympathy for the Poor* ...

GB: Sometimes we take the ones we love for granted. I think Frank is a bit guilty of that. Over the years you grow to love paint. The way each pigment and manufacturer have idiosyncrasies all of their own. Indian yellow, made from ox's urine, covers nothing, but glazes like a dream. Purple Lake goes from black to bright red, with a little help. I won't go on, but one grows to love the fights. The pigments become part of the way your brain works, and you get caught up in the language of brush marks and images. "Truth to materials"—you see, you can't get more Modernist than that and, ah, it's romantic too.

The self-abuser (I'm thinking of Salvador Dali and his guilty hand) has a relationship with the model too! The naked flesh of the original model may be long dead but that just aids the imagination. I like painting wrinkles. Fragonard, Auerbach and Rembrandt painted the living. Their flesh has become paint, so I paint paint. The paint is the crusty residue left after the relationship between the artist and his model is over. It is all there is left of real love, so I paint that. Sad songs are the best. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has something to do with it.

I can see a progression in my work. Earlier paintings were softer, more akin to Gerhard Richter's nostalgia. The paintings have now become harsher. The blur has all but gone, though the paintings in this exhibition still have traces. I seem to delight in making the white highlights of the distended brush marks sharp and less forgiving. When I paint I always imagine a delirious light source, literally Fragonard on acid, less "the cruel light of day", more the cruel artificial greens and ultraviolet of a dance-floor. I don't know if cadmium green is beautiful or just poisonous, but it lights the way for my "creatures of the night". I usually have a number of paintings on the go, so I paint them for sometimes up to a year. A long gestation

period often means that the painting bears little similarity to my original intention. Most works are made from two elements; an original painting, which acts as the skeleton, and a second painting, which acts as a color model or skin. I only have a rough idea what the skeleton will look like in its new skin, so by time I have had my little fight to get it to fit, the painting may be upside down, back to front, and I will have tried several other artists' work to help get it right. An atheist, in love with the history of painting and with a liking for the blackly frivolous, is forced to see through the eyes of the Catholic Church. Catholicism and the art it spawned had such a great effect on portraiture and representation that it has changed the language with which we read the world. Me, I'm just getting even.

SF: The dutch painter Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts made a painting between 1670-75 called "Reversed Painting". It is a radical meditation about painting itself. The painting is a *trompe l'oeil* that represents the back of a painting (frame, stretcher, and canvas with an inventory number). When you try to turn round the painting you're supposed to discover the "real", painted representation, but there is "nothing" but the real back of a normal oil painting: the canvas, stretcher, and frame. Painting has come to its annihilation.

Like Gijsbrechts, your paintings also seem to be an effort to understand painting itself: it requires both the undermining and celebrating of painting. Stoichita speaks about painting as a way of investigating the inner and aesthetic limits of painting, the possibilities of communication, the absorption of the viewer and the traces of the painter. Your *trompe l'oeil* is, if I understand it properly, the appropriate method to evoke maximum polyfocality: a visceral, anamorphic, misty, romantic subversion.

You mesmerize the viewer by provoking paradoxical feelings through paradoxical means. Perhaps this derives from the overlapping of images from different historical eras. What does this compounding and

cannibalization mean in your work? It seems that part of it stems from both a darkness and a vicious sense of humor. You have made simultaneous references to Blake, Füssli, and Böcklin all at once. What about literary sources: Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James or William Beckford? What about music? Cinema? Does literature, music or film have an influence on your imagination?

GB: There are certain painters, Fabian Marcaccio, or perhaps David Reed who talk about painting as some sort of "endgame" or "I can't go on I'll go on" strategy—very much in the spirit of Samuel Beckett. Whilst Beckett's very black comedy became a model for me I could not tolerate the sociological wasteland that is abstraction. If there is something that might attempt to emasculate painting and perhaps be the equivalent of Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts' joke, I see it as abstraction. When asked "What do you do?", I reply, "I'm a painter". It feels like saying "Yes, I'm dull and irrelevant", so I try and explain my way out of it. The greatest danger lies in trying to look clever. Marcel Duchamp's phrase, "as stupid as a painter" describes how a painter's use of colour, form and line have an annoying habit of confounding our expectations of language. In other words "why do I find this oafish drivel so appealing?". I hope I celebrate some of painting's more clownish attributes, rather than just myopically mourn its problems. I like the idea of "polyfocality", which in order to view multiple contradictions from a single perspective one must to adopt. A painting is such a still thing, in order to engender animation I want to move the viewer. It's a painting of flowers: no, it has a face. The figure is happy: no, it's sad. The painting looks new: no, perhaps it's quite old. I never saw a painting like it before: oh, but it's so derivative, etc, etc. I want an uneasy, chancy event to be taking place. I honestly don't see it as destroying painting: this is painting. If you take polyfocality away you have nothing but a blank canvas, and if you are still in the mood for contradiction there's Robert Ryman.

The titles of many of my paintings act as musical, literary or filmic references. Though these may initially seem like they confound meaning, as in *The Rebel*, if one knows the film *The Rebel* (or *Call Me Genius*, 1960) the painting could easily be a stage prop. In the film, Tony Hancock manages to aggressively satirize the avant-garde painter whilst sincerely

suggesting there to be no greater aspiration in life. The "dead soul", in the title of the painting, *Dead Souls* (after *Chris Foss*), could simply refer to the inhabitants of the painting's deathly city. It also, however, recalls the song by the band Joy Division. Numerous other paintings have the prefix "painting for Ian Curtis", the band's dead singer. Joy

Division's mournful yet euphoric, rock music, which can still be danced to like disco, encapsulates every painting I ever wanted to make. A more important reference is Nikolai Gogol's incredible book *Dead Souls*, in which the dead are more useful than the living—a sentiment close to my heart—and a more vicious humour would be difficult to find.



Glenn Brown
Joseph Beuys (after Rembrandt), 2001
 97 x 79,5 cm
 Collection Bobbi & Walter Zifkin, Los Angeles
 Courtesy Patrick Painter, Inc., Santa Monica
 & Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin



Glenn Brown
Seligsprechung, 2000
 85 x 67,5 cm
 Collection Bob Rennie, Vancouver
 Courtesy Patrick Painter, Inc., Santa Monica
 & Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin



Glenn Brown
The End of the Twentieth Century (after Fragonard and Baselitz), 1996
 79 x 57 cm
 Collection Byron R. Meyer, San Francisco
 Courtesy Patrick Painter, Inc., Santa Monica & Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin



Glenn Brown
The Rebel, 2001
 84,5 x 70 cm
 Collection Leopoldo Villareal Fernandez, New York
 Courtesy Patrick Painter, Inc., Santa Monica
 & Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin



Glenn Brown
The Suicide of Guy Debord, 2001
 58,5 x 46,7 cm
 Courtesy de l'artiste & Patrick Painter, Inc., Santa Monica
 & Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin



Glenn Brown
Ride with the Devil, Sympathy for the Poor, 2001
 62,5 x 46 cm
 Collection Rudolph & Ute Scharpf, Stuttgart