

Michael Bracewell **The Space Between**



Selected Writings on Art **Edited by Doro Globus**





262 · Glenn Brown  
*Deep Throat*, 2007  
 Oil on panel  
 152 × 122 cm | 60 × 48 in

## Concerning the Art of Glenn Brown

I tend to think of the exhibitions I do as a loose accumulation of paintings with no single theme – like a variety show. A comedy act, a magician, dancing girls, a ventriloquist, and of course a good impressionist make, I think, a reasonable show. In other words, no; this exhibition, as with all the shows I have had so far, has no title.

Glenn Brown (2007)

Caught as though at the moment of liquefaction, trailing, fragmentary, yet somehow filled with intent, the colours brood, thicken and broil. High-aesthetic strategy gives verse to trenchant morbidity, deliquescence and rot. Palest pink and liquid violet abut satanic vermillion – an alarming confection. Curlicues of gauzy silver extrude in vaporous slipstream from the depths of haunted furrows; shades of fervid emerald putrescence appear bent to depictions of mannered splendour. In the art of Glenn Brown, nothing is quite as it seems, although all is as it appears. The occupants of his paintings are the stuff of dreams. Step forward, purple-haired, veiled-eyed, sallow-skinned young shepherd boy and coy scarlet lamb! In this, Brown's paintings are above all *performances*: seance as vaudeville; the clanking of chains as 'easy listening'.

'The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.' So opens Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). The scene set – artistic London, a fragrant day in early summer – the reader is introduced to the artist Basil Hallward, who is being visited by the philosophising aesthete Lord Henry Wotton. They converse on the nature of art and artists, on the representation of beauty in art, and in particular on the beauty of youth. But we are in a world of incense and velvet. Lord Henry's heavy, opium-tainted cigarette, no less



than the sullen murmur of bees that renders the stillness of the studio even more oppressive, pronounces the temper of *fin-de-siècle* decadence.

A time-travelling Glenn Brown, dispatched through various temporal dimensions from his own London studio to that of his fictitious late-Victorian brother-artist, might well be tempted to step forward and contribute a few remarks of his own. And were Hallward and Wotton to return his visit, joining him in twenty-first century Shoreditch, they would find much in Brown's painting to stop them dead in their tracks. For Brown's art is drawn from some deep, hidden crease in aesthetic philosophy, a place where the constitutions of art and beauty and the capacities of painting are collapsed and reconfigured, possibly, primarily, for no other reason than his own entertainment. Lord Henry's delight in paradox – 'I can believe anything, so long as it is quite incredible' – would be answered *aperçu* for *aperçu* by the seemingly effortless elegance with which the conceptualism of Brown's art is rendered so eloquent by the virtuosity of his technique.

In one sense, it might be seen as a pop-hip descendant of Augustan Mock Heroism (the eighteenth-century fusion, in English poetry, of classicism and satire); sliding down the same sunbeam, so the flippant, aphoristic philosophising of Wilde's aesthetic avatar is a decadent evolution of the Augustan wit of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. The common denominator in this dizzying but noble lineage is a honed understanding of the relationship, artistically and metaphysically, between surface and depth. In experiencing Brown's art, it is as though we fall right through the pristine, utterly smooth surface of his beguiling paintings, into the extreme depths of a profound aesthetic statement – as surely as Jean Cocteau's fatefully inquisitive poet in his seminal film *Le sang d'un poète* (*The Blood of a Poet*, 1930) falls through the surface of a mirror into the parallel reality of a none-too-comforting afterlife. We find ourselves in a vertiginous underworld, a place beyond the looking glass, somewhere seemingly within the shadow of human psychology, but having one of its better days.

Whether the subject is a skull, a floating city, a reclining figure, a beauteous youth holding a lamb, dead birds, a fleshy maiden, or some unknowable, anthropomorphic being, Brown's paintings are all, in a way, psychological portraits. They describe accumulated thought as picto-

rial mulch, as though the pulses and currents of the mind could be seen as corporeal matter. The Freudian silage of lumpen subconsciousness is not merely given shape, colour and form by the artist, but brought to life to parade around in the raiments of elevated, enshrined, iconic beauty. Brown delights in the capture of those works by other artists that he feels might be colonised by his own concerns; the most senior constellations in the firmament of art history, more often than not, comprise his targets: Auerbach, Van Gogh, Fragonard, De Kooning, John Martin. There is a slapstick element in this process, the conceptual equivalent of a person clubbed from behind with a sock filled with wet sand, a sack thrown over his head. The only limits to Brown's audacity are those imposed by his impeccable taste. However, the exuberance and verve of his painting, for all its gothic underpinnings, is derived from its resolution of contradictions. Thus, simultaneous to his aesthetic connoisseurship, he is less concerned with the art-historical status of those works he appropriates than with their ability to serve his purpose – namely, his epic exploration of paint and painting.

Just as Basil Hallward's portrait of Dorian Gray, through some perverted act of transubstantiation, reveals the decay and corrupting soul of the sitter while Dorian himself remains eternally ageless and handsome, so in Brown's art we see a fateful contract between painting itself, the history of art, and the processes of aesthetic putrefaction. In this, I am reminded, strangely, of John Milton's masque *Comus* (1634), in which an evil sorcerer attempts to persuade a chaste and hapless virgin, lost in dark and tangled woods, that if we do not live for pleasure in a state of perpetual, orgiastic consumption, then Nature herself will be 'strang'd with her waste fertility'. Such an argument might neatly double as an allegory of the postmodern condition: an unstoppable glut of visual culture, faced with either starvation or bulimia, becomes gorged on a surfeit of sheer stylistic gorgeousness. Further parallel might be found in the actual performance of *Comus*. To borrow from Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey's illuminating *Introduction to Milton's Shorter Poems*, 'It is the form that permits such ambidextrous vision; the personages of allegory, neither "realistic" nor "symbolic", but both at once, move simultaneously in concentric worlds', as do the 'subjects' of Brown's paintings, dually operational between their lives as source material and their afterlives as



replicas or mutants. We find, for example, amongst these most recent paintings, a triumphal female figure: given her commanding pose, she might have been looted from an allegorical frieze or kidnapped from some assuredly aristocratic *mise-en-scène*. Brown, an accomplished grave-robber, has found a subject who summons with a backward glance, serene, aloof, her mouth a sensuous gash, a lock of her extravagant coif making a soft curl above the nape of her neck. Her *décolletage*, however, exposes mint-blue skin; the flounces and billows of her dress have a pallid, rusty, oysterish hue, their folds extrapolating into nameless weals and folds of unctuous colour, supreme above the bulbous mounds of what appear to be three rouge-nipped, milky breasts and the collapsed length of a fiery-tipped, monstrous phallus. The background is Bible-black, with a gaseous circle of silvery luminescence against which the central figure, our joyous and imperious lady, rides a riot of colour and form.

On first acquaintance, it is the visual luxuriance of Brown's painting that draws the viewer deeper and deeper into the heady gravitational field with which each work appears to be surrounded. And this has been a constant throughout his work. One may encounter a flotilla of asteroids, colonised by clusters of squat illuminated towers, some of which are topped with vast spheres (*Böcklin's Tomb*, 1998, after Chris Foss's *Floating Cities*, 1981). The surrounds of deep space are submarine, ink-blue, fathomless. Look closer at the craggy bulk of the nearest floating city and study the protruding, moonlit rims of what could be the outlets of the asteroid's internal engines: they emerge from cliffs of cold, shadowy rock, and, this being the world of science fiction, their dark mouths might be thousands of miles wide or so small as to be almost invisible to the human eye. Above all, the painting is visceral in its articulation of weight and weightlessness. In turn, the viewer, drawn towards the painting's surface, feels to have entered the magnetic field of Brown's dizzying aesthetic, an endlessly tensile place, the physics of which are derived from simultaneously active currents of repulsion and attraction. The surfaces of the paintings, as smooth and flat as a matte photograph, often create the illusion of being dense, heavily worked layers and encrustations of paint. One approaches the paintings in anticipation of a virtually tactile experience, to be met instead by cool flatness. This chill,

however, is as distant from cold intellectualism as it is from signifying the merely pristine.

The deceptively smooth surfaces serve to further heighten the paintings' undeniable sentience; one feels to be in the presence of some near-chemical process resulting from Brown's bravura fusion of intention, selection, interpretation, and vision. Vampiric, he drains his chosen subjects of their original life fluids; rendered lifeless, malleable, they then become open to reanimation.

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I always like to think of my paintings as double-edged, being between ugly and pleasurable. One reaction I get from people is that they don't like looking at them, that they repel the eye. I think this stems from something about their flatness, and the almost irksome sense of detail in them. Also from the fact that you don't quite know what you're looking at: you see brushmarks, but they're not 'real' brushmarks – they're fake in one sense.

For a long time I was criticised on the grounds of 'one day he'll get around to doing his own thing', as though, eventually, I would grow up and stop copying other people's pictures. This pressure came from other artists as well. This criticism happened less in America, where Pop art had changed attitudes to art; but in England the idea of appropriation is still not quite accepted. It's rather as though, because the whole thing isn't seen as having poured out of my own soul, I'm not really a proper painter. But I have determined that appropriation is fundamental to what I do, and so all my work has a basis in other works of 'high' or 'low' art.

I like my paintings to have one foot in the grave, as it were, and to be not quite of this world. I would like them to exist in a dream world, which I think of as being the place that they occupy, a world that is made up of the accumulation of images that we have stored in our subconscious, and that coagulate and mutate when we sleep. There is a certain point, for me, in the process of making a painting when the painting itself starts telling me what to do. Subsequent to the earliest



stages of building the initial layers of colour and form, I reach a point where I no longer have to force my will on it. I realise that the painting had reached a stage where it had its own personality.

I liked the idea of painting a decrepit or melancholic skull that could also have the sensibility of dance music. I think that in painting or music you do look for those sudden changes of emotion; and it is when such changes creep up on you that they seem to have the most effect. Whether it's Degas, with his bizarre use of colour – very heightened colours depicting quite banal subjects – or De Kooning, with a colossal sense of aggression in the brushmarks, yet a palette of pink and yellow ice-cream colours.

There is a struggle in my work between figuration and abstraction; and I always want to make abstract paintings. I like that idea of having a painting as straightforwardly raw as possible, without figuration getting in the way, so it's just about colour and drawing and form. One of the reasons I liked making the science-fiction paintings was that there was something very abstract about them. I think science fiction is an abstract space where anything can happen, really. It's a blank canvas on which to invent what you like; and there's no gravity, which is a thing that abstract painting generally tried to achieve – you could turn the painting any way up and it would still work.

The paintings in Tony Hancock's *The Rebel* (1961) look very engaging. They were made ironically, but 30 years after the film was made, that irony would be considered tasteful, to be great 'bad taste'. The sculpture Hancock makes in the film, *Aphrodite at the Watering Hole*, has a wonderfully awkward sense of creativity about it, which is repellent and ugly whilst also being somehow beautiful. The beauty is partly Hancock's character himself. But whether he's cycling around on a canvas, or chipping away at *Aphrodite*, it's the fact that he doesn't quite know what he's doing, yet can still create works of genius, that has such an appeal. I think a lot of artists aspire to that sense of rawness, that there is something that, despite intellect and learning, can still possess a profound humanity. Somehow it seems the best way to get to that place is through irony and humour.

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Its head a mass of whipped-up foliage green with tumescent tendrils, a being or object reminiscent of a Green Man woodland spirit of English folklore turns either towards or away from us. It is impossible to identify in which direction the critter faces. If towards us, then its 'chin' might be regarded as raised in pride, defiance, and defended self-worth. If, on the other hand, we are creeping up on it from behind, then its shoulders are slumped and its head droops; its entire body language is that of abjection. On studying the painting, one is inclined to presume the latter, that whatever presence this work transmits, the source is sorrow, tiredness, and a form of cosmic loneliness. But Brown's delight in ambiguity, coupled with his interest in those phenomena that have somehow become discarded and rejected, is translated through his painting into a haunting paean not only to the lonely but to that which has been outlawed for its lack of sophistication. For all we know, this humanoid blob of anaemic boiled spinach might be feeling reasonably perky.

In deepest California, an élite team of super-progressive cyberneticians and software designers has built a secret, somewhat exclusive generation of robots that are programmed to be sad and incompetent. These unhappy machines, activated by voice recognition, will, for example, carry out simple domestic tasks extremely badly – dropping things, breaking them, colliding with other objects, and often working very slowly. The robot will then ask, forlornly, to be graded on its performance on a scale of one to ten, becoming audibly tearful as its faults are marked against it. Others will break down in piteous whimpers, collapse to the floor, and ask for assistance. As the artist, Independent Group member, and later futurologist John McHale once remarked about his work *Frankenstein by Way of IBM*, there is a dark conflation of technical brilliance, pathos, and cruelty. The same is true of Brown, by his own admission an operator in the reanimation of cultural cadavers: he offers artistic rehabilitation to the culturally homeless and aesthetically unloved, but in so doing is sometimes less than kind in his entronement of these outcasts.

What, then, is the common temper of Brown's art? Looking at works such as *Architecture and Morality* and *Death Disco* (both 2004), one appears



to be in some newfound artistic territory, perhaps a small island off the coast of Surrealism. There is austerity and strangeness, evident humour, and no small degree of gothic mystery. At the same time, the works seem to touch on aspects of British neo-Romanticism, while also being utterly at ease with Pop art and in league with postmodernism. Add to this an almost cartoon-like sensibility, as though Leonora Carrington had tutored with Hanna-Barbera. Such is Brown's formidable aesthetic circuitry, however, that there now seems to be the assurance to break free of all conceptual signage. Composition, colour and form appear fluid, enabling the mutation of art-historical reference points to maintain an exquisite balance between figuration and abstraction. His relation as an artist to the physical materiality of paint itself – as evidenced, also, by his sculptural works, most recently a paint-encrusted table, *The Sound of Music* (1995–2007), that appears to be feathered with shards of bright colour – is similarly fundamental to the broader concerns of his art.

From the richly hued, epic science-fiction space-scapes to the meticulous, mutated reclamations of works by other artists, there is at times a further aesthetic relationship to the theology of kitsch, an original definition of which was more concerned with that which has been abandoned and thrown out than that which offends 'sophisticated' taste. In these latest paintings, some of which respond to the visual extravagance of highly romantic, quasi-classical scenes, one might be seeing the visual extrapolation of the thesis put forward by Celeste Olalquiaga in *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (1998). Having distinguished between 'nostalgic kitsch' and 'melancholic kitsch', Olalquiaga observes:

Nostalgic kitsch is a shrunken sign: it has been reduced to its most basic and benign expression. It is a phenomenon that denies both the present and the past in the interest of its own cravings, the only place where this kind of kitsch can firmly locate itself. Nostalgic kitsch is static, it doesn't move, it just oscillates back and forth between the glorified experience and its subject.

By coincidence, an earlier painting, *Oscillate Wildly* (1999), routes Olalquiaga's notion of nostalgic kitsch to Brown's appropriations of the

work of Salvador Dalí, whom Brown has described as being regarded in some circles as too populist to be represented in a sophisticated gallery. One imagines that such banishment is based upon the absorption of some of Dalí's works into mainstream commodity culture, to the currency of mugs, key rings and posters mounted on the bedroom walls of thoughtful teenagers. The images themselves become somehow flattened out by the industrial processes of mass media and mass production. This, in its turn, raises further questions about the relation between 'high' and 'low' art forms in Brown's art, and the skewed, unpredictable dalliance between fine art and the forces of popular culture. For there is a sense in which the industrial commodification of Pop imposes a mechanistic levelling of image, creating a form of illegibility – invisibility, even – derived from the sheer scale of mass production. Brown's courting of repulsion, as well as pleasure, in response to his work suggests his delight in turning taste against itself, a stance that, in our present urban culture of excessive, pasteurised tastefulness, would appear to be usefully anarchistic.

As the retinal impact of Brown's painting derives foremost from his tireless love affair with paint itself, so the ensuing dark comedy of his work is played out between the forces of vulgarity and refinement, ugliness and beauty. Expressed through painting, these characteristics use a symbolic language of mortality; the whole becomes an extended, iridescent conceit, in which time, memory, death and decay are set to perform their own gothic masque on the nature of art and aesthetics. Brown – like Wilde, perhaps – maintains the seriousness of his intentions by way of paradox, technical virtuosity, and no small amount of quotation. Both, too, are determinedly in the service of modernity, appalled as much as amused by the creeping quaintness that can afflict a stagnating culture. Brown, too, is, I guess, an uber-aesthete – a connoisseur of detail and context for whom the defence of beauty lies often in administering to his art small, homeopathic doses of ugliness, awkwardness and insult.

In his essay 'The Decay of Lying' (1891), Wilde writes:

Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines. It is not necessarily realistic in an age of realism, nor spiritual in an age of faith. So



far from being the creation of its time, it is usually in direct opposition to it, and the only history it preserves for us is the history of its own progress.

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Glenn Brown, Stefan Ratibor and Ealan Wingate (eds), *Gagosian Gallery*, New York, 2007, pp.57–63.

