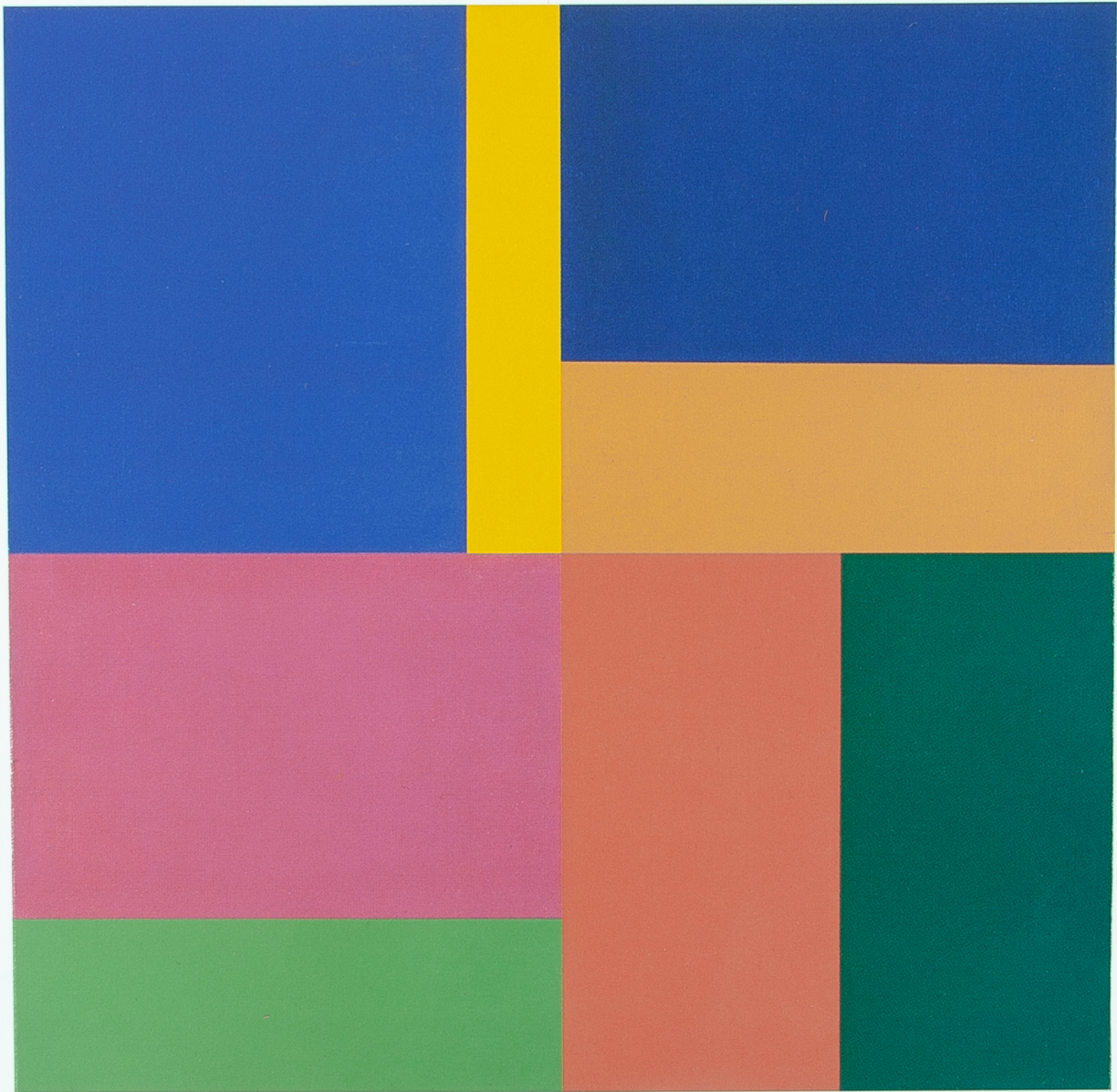


AFTER CONSTRUCTIVISM



Brandon Taylor

Paying respects to Constructivist principles by ridiculing them, the sculptors Marc Quinn and Gavin Turk have also been motivated to simulate meticulously everyday fabric or human flesh, and hence to propagate attitudes of repulsion, curiosity and ultimately astonishment that any alert viewer would bring to the scene.

Such a knowing critique of Constructivist priorities during the 1980s and 90s was not in fact limited to sculpture. In the work of painters like Marcus Harvey, Glenn Brown and Jenny Saville – all members of the 'Sensation' exhibition before it travelled on a ripple of scandal from London to New York – a certain genre of deceit was offered as a central and perhaps defining invitation in the work. Harvey's painting at that time tempted the viewer with female pin-up imagery cleverly dressed up as 'expressionist' art, once more based on a principle of now-you-see-it, now-you-don't: in effect his technique was curvaceous lines spun into nubile bodies which then dissolved again back into the painted web. In the controversial case of *Myra*, Harvey's portrait of the convicted child-killer Myra Hindley, constructed from a child's hand-prints in different tones of grey, viewers were offered a sort of *trompe-l'oeil* effect whose artistic stratagem was once again an uncomfortable double-bind. Was the viewer to 'see' Myra Hindley's face or only the pattern of small hand-images that composed it? What balance was to be struck – if any – between nauseous tabloid 'content' and the much cooler fabrication mastery that seemed to form the aesthetic centre of the work? Glenn Brown's painting from the very beginning has demanded of its viewers that they marvel at how rapid expressionist *facture* can be faithfully simulated by what proves on close inspection to be an immensely slow and painstaking technique; or, in a variation on that method, how familiar Old or Modern Master paintings can be reconstructed obsessively in a painting style quite other than their own (fig. 125). Jenny Saville's early paintings of naked female bodies seen from unorthodox angles, such as *Propped* or *Branded* (both 1992) were conventionally greeted as if they were commentaries upon the upsurge in over-eating and plastic surgery that was becoming widespread in the culture at the time. Yet all these cases could be better seen as dealing with modernist visuality as such: as exercises in the limits and functions of painting in a culture given over to spectacular affluence and excess. And they did this, in effect, through the tactical elaboration of viewing attitudes and positions that play off the enticements of 'content' against those of virtuosic form-giving technique. In Saville's case, the viewer was expected to become voyeuristic, prurient, even vulnerable in the face of over life-sized areas of explicit fleshy display (fig. 126). Both then and now, her paintings achieve this by evoking the work of earlier artists whom Saville admires – Courbet and Velázquez – but also Rubens, whose ability to have his struggling and writhing figures burst



125 Glenn Brown, *The Day the World Turned Auerbach*, 1991, oil on canvas, 56 × 51 cm.

through the organising limits of the picture is doubled rather exactly in Saville's own.¹⁶

It can at least be argued that this anti-Constructivist reversion to the Constructivist obsession with material technique attained a certain 'realism' of its own. In the period of the original Baroque, technical virtuosity had the special function of making the viewer aware that the skill of the fabricator (painter, sculptor or architect) far exceeded the ability of the viewer fully to comprehend it. As could be verified below a painted ceiling by Pietro da Cortona or Andrea Pozzo, or before sculptural masterworks by Bernini or architectural performances by Borromini – or in the presence of the