

Bocklin's Tomb (after Chris Foss) 1998
oil on canvas 221 x 330cm. Collection Eva Chang, Vancouver

Glenn Brown

It was Leon Kossoff who talked about the possibility of painting as though photography had never been invented; something neither he nor Frank Auerbach has achieved. It is nonetheless a marvellous phrase that can be allowed (I hope) to recall a conversation-stopping remark made in Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons*: that the automobile was "an invention that had no business being invented." The apparent attempt in the works of Auerbach and Kossoff to disavow the relationship between painted and photographic ways of seeing and to seek, particularly in painted portraiture, some final authenticity of response was not achievable, as they assuredly know. Photography, like murder, will out; it is the vehicle for a wider distribution of art that both advertises the existence of originals and transforms them from within. It has thoroughly transformed our ways of interpreting images. But it is tactless at this stage to lecture Kossoff and Auerbach on the relationships of their work to photography, or indeed on the rhetoric of authenticity. Glenn Brown's adaptations and re-titlings of Auerbach's works remain strongly tangy with irreverence (he likes to point out that the Indian yellow he favours for transparent glazes is derived from the urine of oxen) and his work is animated more broadly by what might be called an anticlerical spirit. But he is not in the business of simply wronging the ancients. If he was, why would he have to do it so devotedly?

The first repainting from an Auerbach (*Atom Age Vampire*) was in 1991; it was preceded by paintings of architectural subjects and details of the surface of the moon. In *Saturday Night Fever* from 1992 the animation of Auerbach's zig-zag slashes are revealed as ambiguously legible as the banal exhilarations and weekend heroisms of the dance floor, absurdly captured in mid-strut. By the end of the decade, although Brown's range has been expanded, Auerbach's works remain

a source. They still provide for the Glenn Brown idiom an image, contaminated by mock-heroic and irony as it is, of struggle with the material of paint and with the presence of a single human figure. Witness *Death of a Disco Dancer*, included in this exhibition, and painted in black and white. In Auerbach's work the figure is portrayed as an image of solitariness, who is yet bound to the observing painter by the expenditure together of hours in the studio. This labour is then reconfigured by Brown in his own studio, using his perversely accomplished technique. Working from a photomechanical reproduction, the wrinkles and gashes are smoothed out and sealed in a varnish. Artists' studios remain places, however one thinks of them, where a certain amount of existentialism comes with the turf. They are places where artists train themselves in being alone for long periods and learn to be their own taskmasters. As it has appeared in print before I don't mind repeating that Glenn Brown (in his youth an enthusiastic reader of Sartre) often works at night. Somehow this piece of studio lore seems an appropriate image to bear in mind. These are night-pieces, albeit with a soundtrack.

In his most recent return to Auerbach, the bluish-grey painted backgrounds isolate the figure within space much more thoroughly than the originals do, and other changes of orientation of the head within the panel reinsert Auerbach's works into the framework of more overtly historical portrait painting. The blank backgrounds of many historical portraits are, for modern viewers, strange, ambiguous and attractive expanses; we cannot help but see them, anachronistically, as part of a subdued abstract composition. Velasquez certainly sensed something in these backgrounds, an emptiness that is not recoupable as a positive concept of abstraction. Brown's recent employment of such backgrounds to isolate the heads has effected a considerable shift in the impact of the works: the heads are illusionistically defined as blobs realised in space. The portraits - certainly in the context of Brown's other works, after Chris Foss, depicting floating rock satellites and colonised asteroids - become alien life forms or aberrated humanoids, made out of paint yet perhaps remembering a former life, soliciting from the viewer some wished-for recognition as human. *Mark E. Smith as Pope Innocent X* gives the original a



The Higher Beings 1999 (detail)
oil paint on acrylic and plaster, 150 x 40 x 40cm. Collection Frank Cohen, Cheshire



The Tragic Conversion of Salvador Dali (after John Martin) 1998
oil on canvas, 222 x 330cm. Collection Patrick Painter, Los Angeles.

90-degree turn, which with other alterations of emphasis means that the head looks at though it is missing a section at the back, though it remains oblivious of this deficit. "We are the hollow men, the stuffed men" wrote the pope of modernist verse, T.S. Eliot. Later in the century Mark E. Smith's lyrics for *The Fall*, which the painting's title insists we hear, made a despairingly funny public poetry out of the materials with which we are stuffed: "Kwixsave was there, and his friend Bugs the Bear". *Secondary Modern*, in contrast, attains a kind of grandeur or panache. Although the expression is tortured, it is also knowing and camp; could Brown possibly be making sly homage to Annigoni's portrait of Queen Elizabeth, reproductions of which used to hang in so many homes and public places? Perhaps not, but it is the kind of unexpected historicization that Brown's works train viewers to seek.

Though in all this it should be recognized that the continued recourse to Auerbach's work and the conflating of it with the act of posing is ambiguous; it is not simply critique. The use of smooth surfaces is an expressive choice also: "What would otherwise be an impasto surface has become sheer, impacted, opaque, sinister and involuted. Directed inwards not out, the paintings seem to rebuff one's gaze..." wrote Stuart Morgan in a fine essay published in *frieze* in 1993. There have been strange moments of interchange between Auerbach's work and pop culture before: *Japan*, the not very memorable synth-pop band of the 1980s, once selected an Auerbach portrait as an album cover, as though looking for something they were lacking. Brown's works after Auerbach may also be asking us to locate our own unease with a culture of surface; by going deeper into what a life that was all surface might actually be.

In contrast Brown's idiom includes works after Chris Foss, which are transformed and executed on a large scale. They become realised as a popular art form evoking wonder, strangeness and also violent social dislocation, and become continuous with the achievements of John Martin's



Disco 1997-98
oil on canvas mounted on board, 50 x 42cm. Collection Howard Rachofsky, Dallas

nineteenth-century epics. The scale of Foss's original illustrations is not known to us, as the images circulated on paperbacks. Neither do we, as viewers, have much sense of how the originals may have been painted. The scale floats unanchored, as the motif itself does in *Böcklin's Tomb*, which is the second version of this subject and has been laterally reversed. Science fiction is often described as an optimistic form. Brown's works in this style, reinserted into a high art context, are perhaps his most morbid and disturbing. Behind the perfectionism of the technique can be felt a pressure of social dereliction; again we may speculate on how Brown's labour on these works is itself a part of their subject, how his voluntary detachment from the world to paint them remains as part of their subject when they are finally exhibited. It is a relief to come back down to earth to study the social dislocation and the uncertainties of works pre-known and tagged as masterpieces, such as works by Rembrandt. *I Lost My Heart To A Starship Trooper* (1996) puts a romance theme back into its subject, which is a ruby-lipped, bonneted, androgynous and overdressed young man, wearing pearls, posing and looking at himself with some satisfaction.

Zombies of the Stratosphere (1999) is technically a departure, in that it is a painting constructed to stand independently of the wall, on a metal support, but Brown's interest in things that float has prepared the way. It is painted after the Basel version of Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*; there are several versions of the painting, with its extremely disturbing white rectilinear blocks amongst the rocks and cypresses. We probably cannot avoid knowing that it was one of the most famous paintings of the late nineteenth century, but may not have actually thought about why or had the opportunity to see it. (Böcklin seems to have been a strange man; he had an interest in flying machines and forsook art to work on them for some years.) *Zombies of the Stratosphere* is painted as a cut-out. This does not entirely disturb the illusionism but it does have the effect of making the island even more unreachable, trapped in two dimensions.

The other artist in whom Brown appears to have a particularly intense interest is Salvador Dali. The repaintings from Dali are less numerous, and have focused on the period before Dali's conversion to Catholicism, which was described in one of Brown's titles as *tragic. Oscillate Wildly* has been altered from the original in several ways: it is painted in black and white, it has been laterally reversed, and it has been anamorphically stretched. Its scale is that of a history painting, and its proportions are also immediately recognizable as those of a wide cinema screen. Brown has mentioned the impact of the dream sequence designed by Dali for Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, the shock of finally seeing a Dali in black and white. The proportions are also precisely those of Picasso's *Guernica*; the impressive scale is actually just one quarter as large. The new work has a gravitas that almost never appears in Dali's work, even when as here we can hardly avoid knowing he was reflecting on the Spanish Civil War (it is part of the Dali legend that at certain points he was being serious). *Guernica* was just as much the product of a personal symbolism, but Dali's personality is still pungent in his civil war works in a way that many viewers persist in finding disturbing. *Autumn Cannibalism* is culturally sanctioned as one of the works by Dali where viewers are meant to suspend their judgement on the artist and, who knows, think about history. I suspect many fail to do that; this defamiliarization of the work in black, grey and white is perhaps a renewed attempt to help us think about history, even if it is finally only art history. Brown's attempt to reinstate Dali alongside Picasso forces us to re-imagine the circumstances of Dali's failure to make a history painting, if failure is what we have decided it was. It also reopens the question of what a *successful* response to this historical juncture would have been, and why Picasso's nobler sentiments have been preferred. A paradoxically cinematic and painted space opens up, where for a moment the past is not something from which viewers feel fully insulated. It is one of the most striking examples of how Brown can effect a change in his source, or rather how he demonstrates that the past is in fact restless and apt to change as one tries to examine it.

Ian Hunt

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front:- left to right:
Secondary Modern 1998, oil on canvas, 59.6 x 47.4cm. Private collection, London.
Paranoiac - Critical Method 1998 (edition of 5) Ilfochrome Classic print, white frame, 64.5 x 53.3cm.
Bertrand Russell at the BBC 1999, oil on wood, 72 x 64cm.
I Lost My Heart to a Starship Trooper 1996 oil on canvas mounted on board, 64.8 x 53.5cm. Collection FRAC Limousin, Limoges, France.
Death of a Disco Dancer 1998, oil on canvas, 70 x 61.5cm. Private Collection, London.

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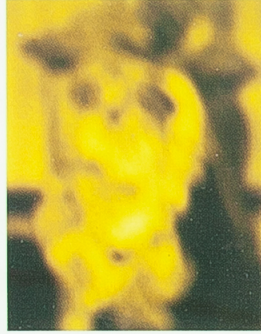


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