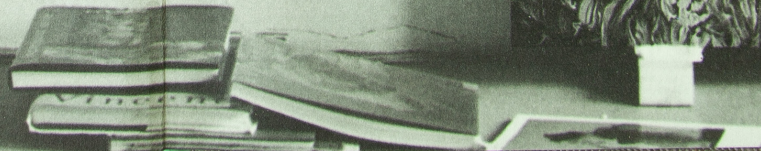


GLENN BROWN





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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

February 25 - April 10, 2004



AGAINST CLICHÉ

Glenn Brown and the Possibilities of Painting

David Freedberg

Painting as an artform has long been declared dead, its possibilities often thought to be exhausted. But in this exhibition of his latest work, his finest and most mature to date, Glenn Brown raises the stakes. Irony and paradox abound. Consistency and elegance are quickly subverted in favor of more complex qualities. Brown's affection for the clownish and the pantomimic seems at odds with the internal coherence of the group of work in this show. The thoughtful and often pointed elegance of his installation belies his interest in kitsch. "In all my works I want rich vulgarity and bawdiness," he has said; while the high seriousness of his paintings is unquestionable, so too is the humor—sometimes wry, sometimes banal, most of all ironic.

Yet these are possibly the least of the paradoxes that permeate Brown's work. They begin with his painterly technique. The bravura of his brushwork is astonishing: upon first impression, Brown appears to be one of the great exponents of the vigorous stroke, of brilliant impasto, of the thick and decisive line. But when you look more closely, you are brought up short. Here, on gleaming surfaces prepared with all the care and precision of an old master, everything is perfectly smooth. A kind of savage pictorial drama is achieved with the finest possible brush, leaving a surface so puzzlingly free of thick impasto that many spectators may feel that these are little more than prints or some other form of mechanical reproduction. The vigorous line is certainly there, and it is full of intensity; but the vigor is not achieved by means of thickly applied, almost palpable paint surfaces, as in the case of almost all of Brown's models, from the old masters through contemporary artists. Where one would expect roughness and granularity, all is refined; no sharp and extravagant gestures, no jagged or blunt strokes, but rather a breathtaking accumulation of swirling lines, beautifully applied. Psychic drama seems to give way to cool skill—or so it may seem. Swiftly one realizes that Brown has invented a new way of painting, in which intense pictorial action does not leave palpable traces of paint, either as indices of the artist's psyche or as a significantly expressive medium. These are strokes that seem uninflected by the signs of individuality. For all the traditional preparation of his pictorial

supports (carefully gessoed panels, perfectly smooth layers of underpainting), one soon realizes that Brown has set out to subvert the very bases of painting, and to undermine our expectations of it, both psychological and technical.

All this emerges clearly from Brown's copies of Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Fragonard, and Baselitz in the present exhibition. But immediately another question emerges. Are these works really copies? Or are they adaptations of one kind or another? It is not at all clear how one is to speak of these works. As we shall see, they always manipulate their models quite extravagantly. They are neither transcriptions nor pastiches; to call them appropriations would be to describe them inadequately. That term turns out to be too cool for the significantly deconstructionist project in which Brown is engaged; in fact, the strategy is altogether different. Let us look at them one by one, before attempting to place them precisely.

Perhaps the most disturbing of all the paintings on display here, and possibly the most profound, is the work entitled *Sex* (which along with *Death* and *Religion*—that old trio—turns out to be one of the leitmotifs of the group as a whole). Based on Van Dyck's portrait of Cornelis van der Geest in the National Gallery in London, the head has been so elongated (a characteristic move of Brown's) that most viewers, ignorant of the beautiful and moving original portrait from which it is derived, think that it comes from some painting or another by El Greco. But the manipulations of Van Dyck's portrait go far beyond simple elongation. As always in Brown's work, the impasto of the original has been altogether suppressed and replaced by Brown's characteristic swirls of an exceptionally fine brush: they are labyrinthine, vermiculate, serpentlike, constantly mobile. Then there are the colors: the realistic flesh tones of the original turned blue, the brilliant white collar made yellow, and the dark background invested with the faintest suggestion of cold fire. In the midst of these unearthly hues, the only residue of living flesh is in the redness of the nose. It is so red that it reminds one of the clown figures that have always been so important to this painter's sense of ironic detachment from his sources of inspiration, indeed from the very history he reworks in his paintings.

There is something still more poignant in this work. The poignancy is obvious to any beholder, but it is probably even more so to those who are acquainted with Van Dyck's painting of the Antwerp alderman. For in his version, Brown replaced with cataracts the liquid and expressive eyes of the original, tired though they may be. Van Dyck's vivid eyes are now covered by a gray film, a visual caul, so to speak. The effect is altogether arresting: it confuses the beholder by signaling the failure of the very instruments by which we grasp and evaluate any work of art, and hints at Brown's deliberate strategy of veiling the literal and psychological depths of the expressive means of painting.

Facing this work across the gallery Brown appropriately placed his reworking of Rembrandt's *Flora* of 1634. This was a clever and pointed move, for in this picture Brown did something strange to the eyes, turning the heavy-lidded, somewhat sluggish eyes of the original into a bloodshot gaze. That gaze now belongs to a picture

entitled *Death Disco*, silently looking across at the blindness of *Sex*. These works are not just coolly ironic postmodern appropriations of ancient pictures; they generate narratives that are deadly serious, and invest whatever clownishness they may possess with mordant meaning—just like the comic fool in classic tragedy (with whom Brown sometimes says he identifies).

At the same time Brown continues his exploration of the means of painting, and his severance of technique from the dramas of content and expression. Once more he elongates the original almost beyond recognition, suppressing the suggestion of pregnancy in Rembrandt's Saskia (his model for this *Flora*), and removing the shepherdess's *houette*, the sign of her pastoral calling (though he cannot resist exaggerating the droop of the giant tulip that falls from her garland). Above all Brown proclaims his coloristic inventiveness: he changes the muted tones of his *Flora* into the deep unnatural blue of many flowers in her hair, of the broad sash crossing her bodice, and he makes the background a brilliant yellow, purposely recalling van Gogh's famous painting of *L'Arlesienne*. It reminds one of that painter for whom, above all, the ferociously broad and impastoed stroke signified emotional drama and psychic turbulence.

No such equations, one might think, for *this* painter. And yet in the two paintings from Fragonard, coloristic modification combines with sheer breadth of brushstroke (however much the texture of these strokes may be annulled) in order to achieve both high drama and insidious meaning. Brown's version of Fragonard's so-called *Portrait of an Artist* (of around 1770) gains intensity not just from the massive strokes that make up the sleeves and collar of the sitter, but from the blue eyes, red hair, and even redder book set against the deep blue background, suggesting something of the heavenly and the divine; while the "companion" portrait takes the French master's painting of Mme. Guimard and turns the relative modesty of the sitter—just as, perhaps, in the case of *Flora* / *Death Disco*—into something rather more challenging. Not only are the colors changed from fresh yellows and reds into rather lurid, even putrid combinations (the dyed hair itself makes the point), her gaze becomes altogether more pert, more obviously wanton. She acquires a prominent beauty spot, and the modest blue-gray ribbon around her neck turns into a bright red one. This is not a ribbon in the end, but a death-cut. No wonder that in his installation, Brown chose to have this work, appropriately entitled *Filth*, "look away" from the male portrait, entitled *America*. The relation is both knowingly witty and ironic.

At this point these qualities multiply. It is not only that the darkly atmospheric, almost celestial setting is given to the heroic personification of America (rather than being related to the divine inspiration of the artist), and that the innocent female sitter becomes filthy; it is that the smooth slickness of surface altogether subverts the showy gesturalism of the stroke, just as in every other work in this exhibition.

This fundamental irony emerges nowhere more clearly, I think, than in the difficult painting called *Dirty*. It is the one painting in the show wherein the reference to the savage and massively complex brushwork of the British painter Frank Auerbach

is overt. While no one could doubt Brown's constant pictorial allusions to the ways "in which painters like Appel, de Kooning, and Baselitz used similarly vigorous strokes to represent and model the forms on their canvas, Auerbach has long been his favorite source for appropriation and readjustment. In turning the heavy brushwork into a surface that is as flat as a photograph (or, say, like a work by Gerhard Richter) Brown here offers one of his fullest critiques of the indicia of the stroke and its authorial freightedness.

At first sight, the exceptionally broad strokes used to delineate the bone structure of the face and to expose the tendons and sinews of the neck and underside of the jaw—in striking contrast to the fine halo above this head—may put one in mind of the great flayed oxen of Rembrandt or Soutine. But where their brushwork is thick and heavy with a willed sense of fleshiness, Brown typically suppresses all signs of just these indicia, whether physiological or authorial. What remains of flesh here is the pinkness suffusing the whole picture, a color Brown has said comes from Monet—of all painters.

Once more color does its significant work, perhaps even more than density of medium; even so, the painting remains compelling because of the ways in which viewers seek to form (or rather re-form) the features within the picture, as if engaged in the act of modeling itself, finding the form one moment, and losing it to another, newly found one the next. Brown has himself acknowledged of works such as these that "I allow images to come and go as I keep on painting; it's like pulling a form in clay."

In a brisk and critical review of the famous 1995 exhibition of paintings by de Kooning, Brown wrote that "the curators have seen fit to designate the figurative against the abstract, and consequently fly in the face of de Kooning's considered metamorphic confusion." Here Brown could almost be speaking for himself. His works are not simply figurative, as they might seem at first sight, nor ought they only to be judged as such. The notion of "considered metamorphic confusion" applies just as well to the iconographic and formal complexities of his own work. Brown has himself spoken to me of the pleasure he finds in hearing how spectators spontaneously discover forms within his work of which he may himself have been unaware, or not have intended.

It comes as no surprise, then, to find that Brown especially admires the work of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the mad painter from Prague, who embedded faces in fruit, flowers and vegetables, and fruit, flowers and vegetables in faces. The most overtly Arcimboldesque of the paintings here is the work entitled *Architecture and Morality*, where face and head are supplanted by a bouquet of yellow and white chrysanthemums (taken from Fantin-Latour) and placed on the body of a figure reworked from a double portrait by Lucien Freud.

Such overtly surreal juxtapositions are unusual in Brown, although in this case they do offer a kind of homage to the archetypal painter of flowers as heads; but there is, in fact, a difference. It is brought out most strongly in a number of other

works in the exhibition, most notably *The Osmond Family*. In Arcimboldo's heads, the spectator realizes that there are features *within* his heads with flowers (or fruit, vegetables or implements), just as in the case of Brown's powerful adaptation of Georg Baselitz's *Second P.D. Foot (The Old Native Country)* of 1960–63. It does not take long to discover first the eye sockets, then the bony nose, and finally the mouth of the skull-like form embedded within this foot. Then one notes the cut—what I earlier called the death-cut—within that foot. This is no everyday limb; or perhaps it is indeed everyday, but it is also, somehow, holy.

Most of the titles (and sometimes the content) of these works almost instantly suggest their moral dimensions. This applies not just to the overt but enigmatic *Architecture and Morality*, but also to the suggestive trio of paintings entitled *Sex*, *America*, and *Filth*; and *Dirty* has a fine halo over its head, a halo so fine that it pictorially mocks the heavy strokes of the rest of the work. At the same time this halo also ironizes—or does it sanctify?—the title. "Are you constructing morality within your world?" Stephen Hepworth asked Brown in an interview in 2000. "I'm discussing it," replied Brown, perhaps too tersely. "I don't believe there is one doctrinal correctness. The humorous irony is that I am an atheist using painting, a language constructed largely via Catholicism." In fact, Brown knows that painting has always "been about religion and imaginary tales," as he put it in the same interview. In the case of Baselitz's *Second P.D. Foot*, Brown turns it into a picture that not only falls squarely into the history of religious painting but actually partakes of the nature of a Christian icon. He gives it the title of *The Osmond Family*, that most scabrous of popular subjects (for popular sentiment has always been a major concern of his).

This is no merely haphazard title, however. To begin with, Brown works his usual transformation of his archetype. He elongates the truncated foot, sets it majestically upright (thus making it something iconic), adjusts the color scale in a way that recalls Philip Guston, and sets it against a pale blue punctuated with black and red stars. The setting, though once more derived from van Gogh, recalls Brown's earlier science-fiction work, but at the same time it gives the foot a truly celestial context. For surely this is none other than Christ's bloodied foot, punctured and cut from the Crucifixion, set against the heavens. The acknowledged source may be Baselitz, but the inspiration is clearly Grünewald, and more specifically Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece, where Christ's limbs are broken, punctured, and cut, just like this foot. The painting here, smooth and slick though it may be, suggests blood, flesh and death; it could not be more carnal in its combination of pinks, reds, yellows, and blue, or in its suggestion of fleshiness and vulnerability. For the wounds (*vulnera*) are there; and so too is the face, making the Christological reference even clearer: this is a picture of nothing so much as the reincarnation of the body, in all its carnality.

There is still more to this fragment of the Passion, however. Embedded in the flesh are not just the wounds and the skull (recalling the skull buried at the bottom of the Crucifixion, and pointing forward to the resurrection of the flesh), but also the dirt and grime that became engrained in his flesh on the way to the Cross, and with

which his mockers tormented him, rubbing dirt into his divine wounds. The title of this painting embodies the clowns—that is, the people themselves—who mocked him, and who turned his Passion into something lurid, ludicrous, and in the end powerfully symbolic. This insistence on the gravity and import of vulgar clownishness pervades all of Brown's work. It is in just this light that we must also turn to the sculpture (though Brown would not call it that, precisely) *Three Wise Virgins*.

Here, of course, the title is explicitly religious. It alludes not just to the Virgin, as Brown has said, but also to the biblical parable of the Wise Virgins who took enough oil for their lamps to watch for the coming of Christ. But each of these Wise Virgins has a clown's nose; one even has the horns of a devil coming out of her head. In its combination of whimsy and ferocity this work recalls the early sculptures of Picasso, with their protruding mouths and noses and hollowed-out eyes. As we pick our way through the now all-too-palpable layers of thick oil paint that make up this sculpture (Brown would prefer to call it a painting) and find one head after another (just as Brown wants us to), we begin to sense the devilish in these clowns. Here we see an awful grin, there a red mouth, and frightening features all-round. Thus do these wise virgins become mockers of Christ, not merely three faithful devotees.

As if to crown these vulgar yet profound ironies comes the sculpture/painting entitled *Alas Dies Laughing*. Here too there may be a further religious allusion—this time to the severed head of John the Baptist. Brown has himself indicated that the block of wood on which he has so strategically placed this head alludes to the executioner's block. Though this work too pays a kind of homage to Baselitz, it is hard not to think as well of Brancusi's similarly shaped sculptures *The Beginning of the World*, carved between 1916 and 1924. These, however, are works of an extraordinary degree of smoothness, gleam and polish, whether in bronze or in marble. And Brown's rough agglomerations of paint offer a kind of critical commentary on them, in a precise inversion of his usual transformation of textured and impastoed paint surface into light and liquid smoothness.

It is hard not to think of the disk on which Brancusi places his originary sculpture, *The Beginning of the World*, as signifying the orbs of the cosmos. But Brown's sculpture has no such claim; on the contrary. This *Alas* is a final laugh in the face of death, a sign of the life that is avowedly embodied in all of Brown's work, the life that he encourages spectators to find both in the impossibly flat pictures and in the all too fleshly sculptures. For these are such palpable pilings-up of paint that we want to touch them, to poke our fingers in them, to provoke them into response or liveliness—even in the case of this severed head. In this way these three-dimensional works—great quantities of paint applied to armatures of wire and plaster—offer a pointed commentary on the two-dimensional paintings in the exhibition. The latter paintings deny all surface, suppress the gestural marks of authorship; the former reveal all of them and visibly and palpably insist on the substantiality of paint. Yet Brown persists in calling these works paintings, as if to push paint back to the two-dimensionality with which it has always been invested.

These new works of 2003 and 2004, then, are self-assured in their high intellectual and technical consistency. Brown has moved away from the science-fiction paintings of earlier years, as well as the almost obsessive reworkings of Auerbach (he saw their thickly textured surfaces as akin to that of the moon, which he had also painted for several years). The relative indecisiveness of his technical goals in his earlier derivations from Fragonard and Rembrandt (as well as, occasionally, from Richter) has now been honed into a masterful and inimitable—if occasionally repellent—style of painting. Above all, it has become clear that the apparent appropriations of earlier and contemporary artists are not really "appropriations" at all, at least not in the usual postmodern sense. Indeed, they reclaim many of the elements of painting in order to put some of the claims of painting back into the world. But in so doing Brown offers a fierce critique of a long-standing view of what painting can achieve, and substitutes for this traditional view a new and wholly innovative one, both theoretically and technically.

So how is one to position Brown's work, with its abundant irony, sharp wit, and high skill, or rather a set of skills that seem to be masked before revealing themselves in their full complexity? How is the work to be seen in relation not only to high culture but also to the world of the popular and the vulgar?

Brown's transcriptions of other painters, as Keith Patrick has put it, "have generally been taken in the context of postmodernism, where his transformation of seemingly gestural painterliness into a flat, painstakingly constructed surface is seen to raise issues of authorship and originality, and to refer to the ways in which our experience of 'the original' is all too often mediated by the photographic reproduction. Ironically," Patrick concludes, "this distinction is lost in reproductions of Brown's work, re-establishing the need to confront his original paintings." Indeed; for as Mark Sladen has concluded, "Brown may indeed be engaged in a postmodern critique, but the finessing in which he engages has a curious relationship to any such critique—implying a recuperation of individual agency at the limits of what can be understood as authenticity."

This seems altogether right to me. Traditional notions of authenticity are clearly at risk—to say the least—in Brown's work, and are intended to be so; but at the same time Brown is making a series of statements about the traditional possibilities of painting that culminate in a fierce critique of how we understand just those possibilities. He himself has noted that the term *appropriation* "has been much maligned and misunderstood." It's a term, he insists, "that seems to only express a certain conceptual framework and obliterates any painterly or aesthetic understanding involved." And this understanding has as much to do with painting itself as with Brown's insistence on the popular and vulgar aspects of his work. He admires the gorgeous vulgarity of Jeff Koons; he wants to make work "that has popular sentiment but involves deconstruction of images." Over and over again Brown emphasizes the importance of the bawdiness and buffoonery through the figure of the clown, because clowns are both popular and unsettling. He wants humor, and above all

black humor, in his work because this is one way, he believes, to access the emotions. Brown finds these qualities in the work of artists like Picasso, George Condo, and finally Velázquez, whose buffoons in the Prado he describes as "wonderfully upsetting, tragic, and black." He loves museums, because they are like going to the movies, he says, a place "for high drama and great acting, for the history of the world to unfurl in front of you."

In the end, this is a high claim for painting. But Brown does not shrink from it. As he says (and as the old cliché goes), he wishes "to breath life into these empty vessels." He wants pictures that have "personal allusions to my own life and onto which I can project personalities of people I know." As if a member of the crowd, Brown reflects on the fact that for him, "the Auerbach, Karel Appel and Jean-Honoré Fragonard paintings weren't just empty subjects, but people; and that almost came on me unaware and took me over." Brown has no reluctance to anthropomorphize, to imagine life into the portraits he copies, emulates, or invents. He also has great tolerance for popular responses to works of art—and paintings in particular—which make of them things to project imagination and desire upon, to see in them whatever the spectator likes. He himself incorporates such a view into his own work process, allowing images to come and go as he keeps on painting.

And so we come to the final paradox, or rather the paradoxical reconciliation. The works in this exhibition are appropriations that are not appropriations, transcriptions that are much more than transcriptions. Brown invests his work with dramatic content and sophisticated painterly skill, and in turn uses these skills to overturn the traditional ones associated with painting. As we have already seen, Brown remains profoundly critical of the way in which art history has rewritten itself, at least in the past four hundred years or so, in order to give prominence to artists like Rembrandt and van Gogh (to say nothing of Auerbach), in whose works the very texture and gestures of the brushwork are supposed to reveal the artist's soul. This notion of the expressive brush has become a fashionable cliché about painting. It is one that Brown has been consistently determined to work against and to resist as fiercely as possible. Yet he is not at all opposed to sheer dexterity. "My desire to paint with detail and dexterity is due," he bluntly proclaims, "to the fact that it is seen as bad taste. To use skill and craftsmanship is vulgar to the art establishment."

Painting is reclaimed precisely because it is popular, not high; because it is vulgar, emotional, and fraught with humor, black and bawdy. Brown has found new functions for painting in the face of the modernist cliché that invests pure form with content, and against the grain of postmodernist strategies of appropriation without content. He has set painting free on a new road. It is avowedly not the high road, but there is much to explore along the way.

PLATES

America

2004

Oil on panel

55 1/8 x 36 1/4 inches

(140 x 93 cm)



Architecture and Morality

2004

Oil on panel

55 1/8 x 38 3/8 inches

(140 x 98 cm)



Death Disco
2004
Oil on panel
52 1/4 x 35 inches
(134 x 89 cm)



Dirty
2003
Oil on panel
41 3/4 x 32 3/4 inches
(105 x 83 cm)



Filth
2004
Oil on panel
52 1/8 x 37 inches
(133 x 94 cm)



Sex
2003
Oil on panel
49 7/8 x 33 1/2 inches
(126 x 85 cm)



The Osmond Family

2003

Oil on panel

56 1/4 x 39 3/4 inches

(143 x 101 cm)







Three Wise Virgins

2004

Oil paint on acrylic over plaster and metal armature

33½ x 21¼ x 21¼ inches

(85 x 55 x 55 cm)







Alas Dies Laughing

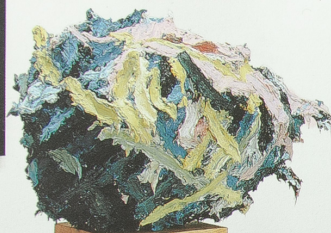
2004

Oil paint on acrylic over plaster and metal armature
on oak base

23 1/2 x 29 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches

(60 x 75 x 46 cm)





SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

Born 1966, Northumberland, England
Lives and works in London

EDUCATION

1990–1992 Goldsmiths College, London, M.A. Fine Art
1985–1988 Bath College of Higher Education, B.A. Fine Art

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 Gagosian Gallery, New York, New York
- 2002 Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, Germany
- 2001 Patrick Painter Inc., Santa Monica, California
- 2000 Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, Germany
Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Centre d'art Contemporain, Bignan, France
- 1999 Jerwood Gallery, London, England
Patrick Painter Inc., Santa Monica, California
- 1998 Patrick Painter Inc., Santa Monica, California
- 1997 Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, France
- 1996 Queen's Hall Arts Centre, Hexham, England
- 1995 Karsten Schubert Gallery, London, England

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 *M_ars, Art and War*, Neue Galerie Graz, Graz, Austria
Dreams and Conflicts: The Viewer's Dictatorship – Delays and Revolutions,
Padiglione Italia, 50th Biennale di Venezia, Italy
Pittura / Paintings – da Rauschenberg a Murakami 1964–2003, Museo Correr,
Venice, Italy
*Une collection de chefs-d'œuvre emprunts, pastiches, copies, citations et
interprétations*, Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain Limousin, Limoges, France
Ice Hot, Recent Paintings from the Scharpf Collection, Hamburger Kunsthalle,
Germany; Staatgalerie Stuttgart, Germany

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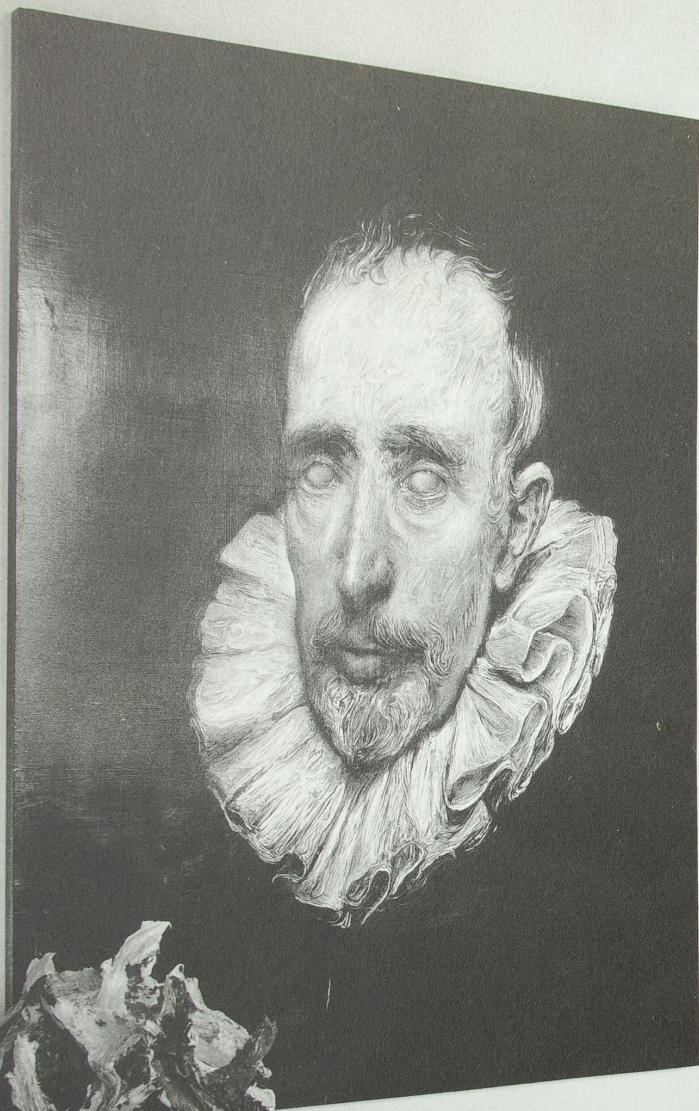
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