

**GLENN
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ETCHINGS
(PORTRAITS)**



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Ridinghouse

Brown, Graf, Rembrandt, Freud

John-Paul Stonard

The enthusiasm of artists for making copies from the old masters during the late-nineteenth century gave rise to what has been termed a 'museum spirit' in painting of the time.¹ Laborious hours spent in front of old works were essential to the academic training of painters such as Edouard Manet who, after inscribing in the 'Register of Copyists' at the Louvre in January 1850, produced numerous studies after Rubens, Titian, Tintoretto and others. Manet's provocative use of these sources in paintings made during the 1860s is well known—the reappearance of Titian's *Venus d'Urbino* (1538) as a modern goddess in his *Olympia* (1863) for example—and reveal the vivid flow of past into present implied by the term 'museum spirit'. This paradigm of transmission however continued only falteringly into the twentieth century. In 1910 the critic Félix Fénéon organised the exhibition *D'Après les maîtres* at the Galerie Bernheim in Paris, showing copies of old master paintings made by contemporary artists including Henri Matisse and Albert Marquet. Painters were often drawn to talismanic works; for Matisse, Chardin's *La Raie*, (1725–26) was such a cynosure. But by this time a changed relationship to the old masters was becoming evident. 'L'air qu'on voit dans les tableaux des maîtres n'est pas de l'air respirable', wrote Edgar Degas.² Fénéon's exhibition came at a moment when the 'museum spirit' was giving way to a commerce with the old masters that was far less polite.

During the twentieth century the tradition of technical mastery that had been passed down from master to apprentice by copying dwindled. Max Doerner's 1921 painting manual, *Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde*, was important for artists such as Otto Dix in communicating the glazing techniques of the old masters, but is nevertheless an isolated example. Rather than copying, the relation to the past has become increasingly defined, in broad terms, by the process of technical reproduction, and thus by appropriation. Museum spaces for contemporary art function as a set of quotation marks in which older works can be reframed and their authority questioned or their parts cannibalised. It is only within this new situation, for example, that an exact facsimile of an older work can be presented not as a fake or a *trompe-l'œil*, but as an autonomous work of art. The frame of the museum draws attention to the fact that vision itself has a history that changes with context. But already with this example there is something more disturbing: the impression that such replication and appropriation entails not so much a conversation with the past as an interrogation of it. Walter Benjamin writes that all quotation is a form of violence, in the sense of

something being torn from its native habitat and isolated in a new context. For a contemporary artist to copy or quote the older masters in a credible manner requires at least some of this violence to be done to the original. Such a harsh interrogation is necessary to bridge the stretch of darkness that now lies between the contemporary artist and the past.

Glenn Brown's prints constructed from published works by the sixteenth century Swiss-German artist Urs Graf, by Rembrandt, and by the twentieth century painter Lucian Freud offer a particularly dark and perplexing view of their sources. They arose from a complicated process of reproduction and manipulation. Brown began by selecting a number of prints or drawings by each artist, and then digitally manipulated scanned reproductions of these, stretching each to a standard size. He then superimposed a number of these digital files to create 'laminated' images of up to 15 different sources. Finally, new etching plates were created from the image file, from which the final composite works were then printed. By this unusually circuitous procedure Brown collapses many reproductive processes into one image. The result is an intense concentration of personality, which becomes both a portrait of the source artist, but also of Brown himself. These are psychological portraits, or anti-portraits, visions of history seen as an accumulation, or as a dark mirror in which the present finds its own indiscriminate image.

An examination of the connections between the three artists chosen by Brown as models reveals some of the ways in which this mirroring occurs. Rembrandt, for example, has figured since the beginning of the last century as the model for an anti-classical, 'existential' tradition, which has barely yet been traced. The primal moment for this history of reception occurred around 1916, when Marcel Duchamp proposed the idea of a 'Reciprocal Readymade'—for which he designated a painting by Rembrandt to be used as an ironing board. It is undoubtedly the version of the Readymade idea most relevant today. Negating an existing painting to create a new and entirely distinct work of art emphasises the 'basic antimony', as Duchamp put it, between the work of art and the Readymade; and by extension between the work of art in the twentieth century, whose philosophical preoccupations overwrite older concerns with hand-manufacture and technique.³ Duchamp's choice of objects for his 'Reciprocal Readymade' was deliberate; the iconoclastic gesture of *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) a reproduction of a mustachioed Mona Lisa, was subtly refined in the idea of the ironing-board Rembrandt: a painting turned on a horizontal plane loses its qualities as viewing object, or a potential window, and becomes an object that may be more suitable for practical purposes—like a map, or a work surface. Demoted in such a manner the painted imagery loses all suggestion of illusionist depth and becomes nothing more than a

decorative surface of colours. The physical qualities of the painting's surface are ironed flat. And of course the impression lingers that the painting, and by extension the traditional idea of art, is being somehow tortured, exposed to hot irons by the jealous artistic spirits of the twentieth century, for whom the technical skills of the old masters can only be replicated second-hand, outside of any meaningful context.

An even darker reflection on Rembrandt was provided by Jean Genet in the 1960s. In his essay 'Le Secret de Rembrandt', Genet suggests that Rembrandt painted with passion only when his vision was determined by a cruel emotion, when the subject was decrepit, 'decomposing, rotting before our eyes'.⁴ Rembrandt's 'secret' was to use art as a compensation for the frustration of his desire for luxury and the illumination of riches. To destroy the 'old vanity', stimulated both by the imagery of the Old Testament and by the flesh of Rembrandt's wives Saskia, then Hendrije, Genet writes, Rembrandt began to paint the world in a way that it became not itself. The painter confounds a fixed sense of values by bestowing brilliance on 'wretched materials', destroying all hierarchies between objects but also between living things, in such a way that the human face becomes the window of an undifferentiated human identity, each equal to all others. In Rembrandt's paintings, 'a hand has the same value as a face, a face as the corner of the table, a table corner as a stick, a stick as a hand, a hand as a sleeve...'.⁵ Genet related this confusion of substances to a more general feeling of horror at being in the world. The archetypal existential moment, as described by Sartre in *La Nausée* (1938) involves a collapse of all distinctions between consciousness and outside reality, laying bare the brute, undifferentiated matter of the world. The veneer of individuality and the differences created by language crumble into nothing. Erotic distinctions in particular fade, the 'beautiful colours' and charm of difference, 'everything that has to do with seduction', as Genet puts it, disappears.

A similar process of physical collapse can be seen in the drawings and prints of Urs Graf, in which everything appears made from one slightly repulsive vegetable substance. Just as things slide into one another, so cruelty is indistinct from sensual pleasure. The late medieval iconography of Aristotle being ridden like a horse by a whip-bearing Phyllis, an iconographic convention demonstrating the perils of adopting a non-Christian philosophy, is the excuse for Graf to create a grotesque equivalence of substance and decoration, pleasure and pain. Little is known of the life or character of the artist who produced these works other than that he was a violent individual, a wife-beater, and possibly a murderer and a rapist.⁶

For the etching *Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf)* 1 (2008), Brown has layered reproductions of five ink drawings by Graf: the *Half-length portrait of a bearded king* (1510, École des Beaux-Arts, Paris); *Half-length portrait of a young man with a pocket-*

sundial (1508, Collection Robert von Hirsch, Basel); *Fool and naked violinist* (1523, Kunsthalle, Darmstadt), *Mercenary returning from the war* (1519, Kunstmuseum, Basel), and *Mercenary, imprisoned by the Devil* (1516, Kupferstichkabinett, Basel). The over-layering of the inky complex creates an anonymous half-length portrait that appears excavated from the inside, bristling with curlicues and wounds. One thinks of Otto Dix's prints from the series *Der Krieg* (1924), particularly the plate showing a dead soldier in a trench, foliage growing in his rotting carcass.

By rendering the source images transparent—a digital process that refers back to the use of transparencies viewed with an overhead projector—Brown draws on the process of de-individualisation that Genet saw in Rembrandt. But if in Rembrandt's paintings objects on the same plane were collapsed into the same substance, transparent layering does the same to physical depth. Past and present are conflated into one layer, as if a period of history could appear in a flash, indiscriminate and dizzyingly simultaneous. The failure of a vital, perhaps erotic relationship with older paintings is not a result of too much distance, but a collapse of distance and difference. Perhaps we may imagine that in the age of technological reproduction it is these distances that are collapsed—by the direct facsimile that Benjamin imagines as destroying the aura of the original. In a society that lives in its past as a visitor to a museum there is indeed the sense that everything that remains is either on display, or instantly available for view as an electronic image.

Brown's laminations of Graf, Rembrandt and Freud seem predicated on the 'infernal transparency' that Genet saw in Rembrandt, and answer the French writer's 'dizzy pursuit, towards nothing'. Today it is imperative for objects displayed in galleries and museums to define their relation to 'art' in the sense of a value that seems no longer possible. Using a variety of rhetorical tricks, by which a new value is placed on the distance with the lost model, the loss is simultaneously highlighted and compensated; just as even in a written sentence one can avoid silence simply by stating the loss: no more beauty, no more technical mastery, no more expressivity, no more naturalism; no more art.

Giorgio Agamben has described how this 'no more', this nihilism of taste, arose as part of a natural process: the perfectionism of good taste always leads, Agamben argues, to bad taste, a 'shapeless and undifferentiated mold' that is somehow the more natural home for art, and also for refined taste.⁷ In tracing this 'natural inclination' of good taste towards its opposite to seventeenth century France, and in particular to the letters of Madame de Sevigné, who confessed her guilt at being caught 'like a limed bird' in novels of intrigue, Agamben shows how the origins of the more recent commerce of high with low had its origins in a refined aristocratic ennui.

In the twentieth century, the good taste of painting directly from the human figure has met this fate time and time again. The contemporary appeal of the paintings of Lucian Freud is in part due to their capacity to function as a relic of older artistic modes, to act as a reassurance that these skills have not entirely been lost; and it is precisely this sense of assurance that may provoke suspicion—or perhaps even jealousy. Confronted with an accumulation of tradition, and of course also by the survival of technical skills—'secret knowledge'—in the work of those artists who still produce naturalistic renderings of the naked human figure, artists now are charged with drawing attention to the 'untransmissability' of older patterns by all means necessary. Artists exercise a capacity which is theirs alone by rights: to destroy older works of art. It is thus that a 'museum spirit' may be discerned in the art of the present, a sense of interrogation in which the past is both elevated as a model and despoiled as a threat.

NOTES

- 1 Jean-Pierre Cuzin, 'Au Louvre, d'après les maîtres', in *Copier Créer. De Turner à Picasso: 300 oeuvres inspirées par les maîtres du Louvre*, exh. cat., Paris: Louvre, 1993, pp. 26–39.
- 2 'One cannot breath in the atmosphere of those old master paintings', in Cuzin, *op. cit.*, p. 34. Source: Edgar Degas, *Lettres*, Paris: Grasset, 1945.
- 3 Marcel Duchamp, 'Apropos of "Readymades" (1961)', in *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 4, July 1966, p. 47.
- 4 Jean Genet, 'Le Secret de Rembrandt', *L'Express*, 4 September 1958. Reprinted in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 5, Paris, 1979, pp. 29–38. English translation: 'Rembrandt's Secret', in Jean Genet, *Fragments of the Artwork*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 84–90, p. 85.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 6 See: Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker (eds.), *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Zwickau, 1978, vol. XIV, pp. 486–88.
- 7 Giorgio Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1970. English translation: *The Man Without Content*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 18.

Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf) 1



Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf) 2



Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf) 3



Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf) 4



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 1



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 2



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 3



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 4



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 5



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 6



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 7



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 8



Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 9



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 1



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 2



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 3



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 4



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 5



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 6



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 7



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 8



Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 9



List of Works

Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf) 1 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
28.8 × 19.5 cm (image)
40.5 × 30 cm (sheet)
4 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf) 2 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
28.8 × 19.5 cm (image)
40.5 × 30 cm (sheet)
4 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf) 3 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
28.8 × 19.5 cm (image)
40.5 × 30 cm (sheet)
4 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Urs Graf) 4 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
28.8 × 19.5 cm (image)
40.5 × 30 cm (sheet)
4 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 1 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
15.8 × 12.3 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 2 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
15.6 × 12.0 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 3 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
17.9 × 13.8 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 4 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
17.8 × 13.8 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 5 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
17.8 × 13.8 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 6 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
16.0 × 12.2 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 7 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
20.2 × 15.8 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
Individual etching
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 8 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
20.4 × 15.8 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
Individual etching
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Rembrandt) 9 2008

Etching on paper, Velin Arches 300 gsm
20.3 × 15.5 cm (image)
35.5 × 29 cm (sheet)
Individual etching
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 1 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
79.0 × 61.7 cm (image)
75 × 94 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 2 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
77.8 × 61.3 cm (image)
75 × 94 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 3 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
78.0 × 61.0 cm (image)
75 × 94 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 4 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
78.0 × 59.8 cm (image)
75 × 94 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 5 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
79.1 × 61.1 cm (image)
75 × 94 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 6 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
78.0 × 61.0 cm (image)
75 × 94 cm (sheet)
6 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 7 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
78.0 × 61.7 cm (image)
75 × 94 cm (sheet)
2 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 8 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
77.3 × 60.5 cm (image)
75 × 94 cm (sheet)
2 part series
Edition of 30 plus 5 artist's proofs

Layered Portrait (after Lucian Freud) 9 2008

Etching on paper, Somerset 300 gsm textured
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