



Bacon, Freud, and the Painting  
of the School of London





# Contemporary Sensibilities

*Hattie Spires and Dávid Fehér*

There are a number of elements that link the artistic practices of the painters presented in this section. All of these artists continued working with oil paint during a time when medium-specificity had seemingly been abandoned, and figurative painting was seen as irrelevant to contemporary art production. The human figure is the central concern of these artists, and their portrayal of an embodied sensibility continues the trajectory of those highly influential artists associated with the School of London, who were able to capture the physical and emotional conditions they inhabited when painting their subjects. However their approaches vary from those of their predecessors, and also from each other.

Through his paintings, Glenn Brown engages in productive dialogue with artistic traditions, especially with those represented by artists of the School of London. He often references canonical paintings or reproductions, for example he provides a paraphrase of Frank Auerbach's portrait of Julia Yardley Mills in a series (*Head of J. Y. M II* 1984-5). Here the painterly impasto is exchanged for an illusionistic, smooth surface inspired by photorealism. Sharp details are contrasted with blurred sections – this evokes the effects of photographic and digital manipulations of images. Brown is not repeating the painting but paints the adapted and manipulated reproduction of the image, and thus creates a complex system of references. In *Shallow Deaths* 2000 (pp. 240-41), Brown turns Auerbach's impasto – that is evoked in its forms but abolished in its materiality, in some parts sharp, in other parts blurred – into blue, thus inserting a reference to Pablo Picasso's blue period in the work.<sup>1</sup> In other cases, Brown follows the

opposite strategy: he does not render the thick layers of painting in smooth surfaces and *trompe l'œil* forms but builds three-dimensional paintings and creates sculpture-like entities (*The Baptist* 2018; pp. 238-39). Brown deals with the expressive painterly tradition that is focused on materiality – which is represented by the artists connected to the London School. He questions the fate of bodily paintings in the era of rapidly growing virtual images, while still adhering to the sensuous materiality of oil paint.

Celia Paul is a direct link to painters of the previous generation. As a student of Lucian Freud at the Slade School of Fine Art and, for a time, in a close relationship with him, she could be said to be a part of the clique that constituted the School of London artists during the 1970s and 1980s. But Paul's work is radically different from Freud's in its empathic gaze. Unlike Freud's unflinching approach that scrutinises his subjects with an unsentimental objectivity and the all-encompassing gaze that pays as much attention to the surrounding environment of the studio as to the sitter, Paul's intimate, quiet portraits depict people as if wanting to bring their inner life to the surface. She paints 'from the inside out';<sup>2</sup> densely rendered individuals are portrayed like orphans, cutting a lonely figure on the canvas. The apparent density of her sitters gives an almost Giacomettiesque gravity to their presence, yet an inner light radiates from each heavily worked figure, a sort of 'halo' emerging from the background and crowning the subject's head.

Both Jenny Saville and Celia Paul share an interest in the work of Chaïm Soutine, and the trope of the butcher is something that Saville has returned to time

**Celia Paul**  
*Painter and Model* 2012  
(detail)



and again. Exuding an almost masculine confidence in her larger-than-life scale and uncompromising, confrontational portrayals of herself, Saville's work verges on sculptural on the picture plane. Her loose brushwork conveys the physical properties of flesh, rendering the painted surface so tactile, so textured, that it evokes meat on a butcher's block (*Untitled [Stare Study III]* 2005–6, pp. 230–1) – a painterly tendency that has drawn comparisons to the work of Freud in his filigreed, voluminous forms but also, more directly, in Soutine's subject matter in *The Butcher Stall* c. 1919.

The sense of immediacy transmitted through Paul's paintings could only come from an artist who paints a life model. When artists – such as Paula Rego – work from other sources, the effect is mediated. But the physical and emotional state of the painter at work is nevertheless communicated. Rego's facility for storytelling is echoed in the work of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, whose elegant character portraits evoke a loose sense of narrative. Yiadom-Boakye paints figures not from life but from her imagination, based on composites of images from scrapbooks and drawings that produce a cast of fictitious characters that, once committed to canvas, are difficult to pin down to a particular time or place. Her subjects are always black and often look as though they have been glimpsed resting during a dance lesson (indeed, she cites Edgar Degas and Walter Richard Sickert as influences).<sup>3</sup> She deftly asserts black identity and inscribes it within the tradition of Western painting (particularly portraiture) a history of predominantly white, male painters in which black sitters were nearly exclusively cast in minor roles.

Her paintings have allusive titles that help to conjure up the faintest idea of a story in the viewer. In *Coterie of Questions* 2015 (pp. 236–37) a young man is perched on a stool. And immediately the brain gets to work: is this an interrogation, and just who is the interrogator? Yiadom-Boakye famously

works quickly, executing most of her paintings in a day, improvising as she works to try to capture a particular moment, fleshing out a character from her imagination as a writer might; indeed, she is a writer as much as a painter.<sup>4</sup> Each work is a kind of scientific experiment for the artist, who tries out new layering combinations of paint to build up colour or play with light and shade. Her loose brushstrokes and broken touches of paint allow her to maintain the delicacy of drawing through an economy of line that is reminiscent of Sickert.

Despite its often abstract appearance, the human figure is central to the work of Cecily Brown. She grew up in a house full of art books, some of which to her seemed illicit. Through these books she was exposed to erotically charged, macabre works by Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and George Grosz, and cultivated an early curiosity in images of the human form, sneaking a peek inside these books as though looking at pornography.<sup>5</sup> Brown describes herself first and foremost as a figurative painter. The body, for Brown is the vehicle by which she can scrutinise the world; the 'meat and flesh of life'. Attraction and desire often come to the fore in her work, as can be seen in *Boy with a Cat* 2015 (pp. 232–33). Here, figures are on the verge of breaking down to a degree of abstraction, to melt into each other or their painted surroundings through an erotic fumbling.

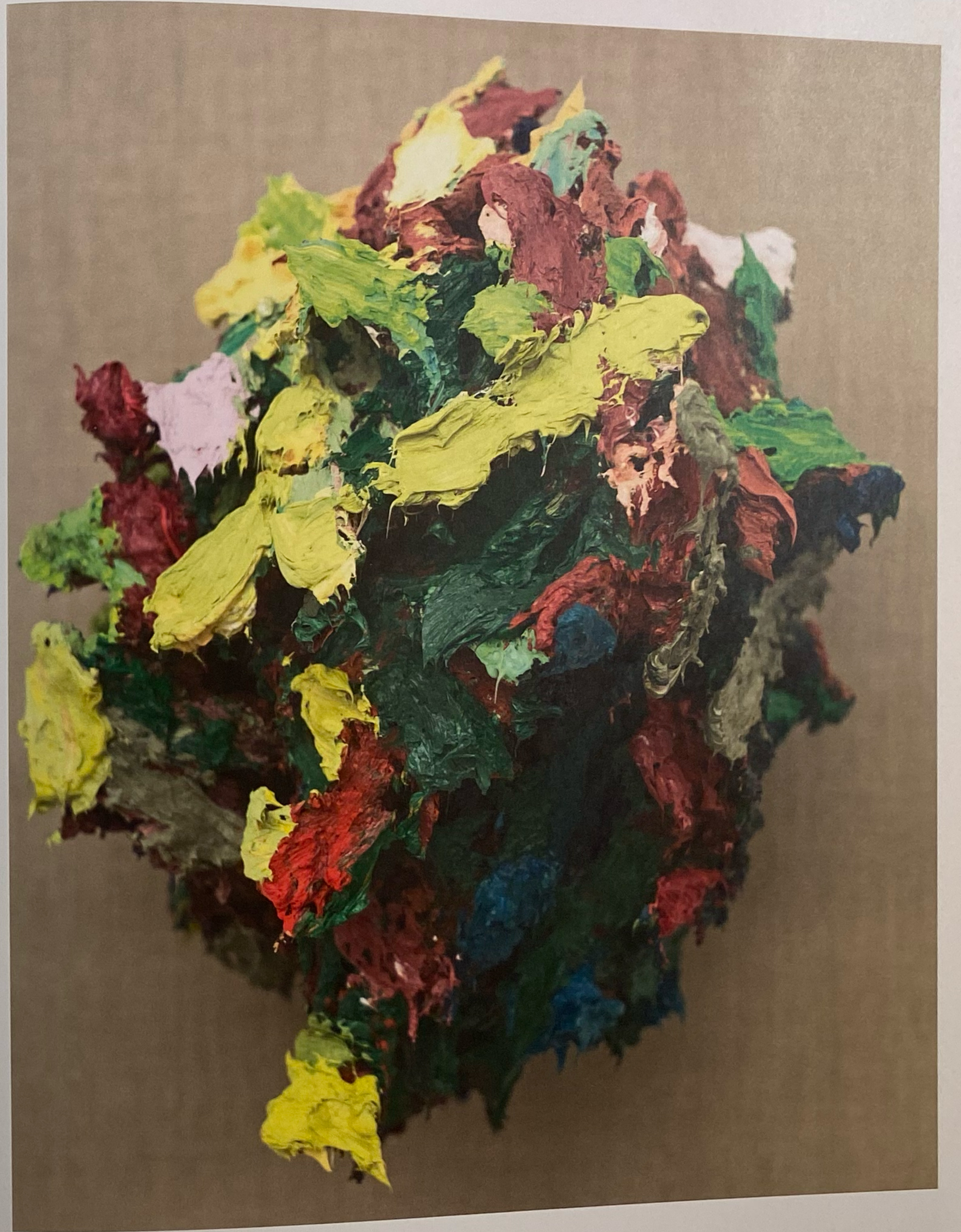
For Cecily Brown, as soon as the figure is removed from the composition, the work simply becomes decorative. What underlies Brown's urge to paint is the same force that impels her peers and those artists who were so influential in plotting this painterly trajectory over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. It is the same thread that runs through the artists' work from Soutine to Saville: '[in order] to talk about anything at all and all the range of things it means to be human, then it is to be found in the body'.



Celia Paul  
*Family Group* 1984–6



Glenn Brown  
*The Baptist*, 2018





Glenn Brown  
*Shallow Deaths* 2000

