

The Shape of Things



Still Life in Britain



Fig. 25
 Glenn Brown (b.1966)
Saint Bimbo, 2024
 India ink and oil paint on panel,
 112 × 80 cm
 Collection of the artist

breathe in and exhale out of nature into the realm of digital abstraction'.²⁴ In a similar way, Toby Ziegler (b.1972) brings together traditional motifs from Dutch and Spanish still-life paintings and uses computer software to generate new forms and pictorial spaces, which often have idiosyncrasies and mistakes, which he painstakingly reproduces by hand. In works such as *Purple Prose* (fig. 24), Ziegler seeks to create a new image somewhere between the virtual and the actual, enjoying the physical act of decomposing and distorting the image. He has painted a figurative image on an aluminium panel followed by a very fast process of erosion carried out by an electric sander, which creates a non-figurative composition in parallel to the original. The artist has said:

The choice of a historical *memento mori* as motif, and my approach to making the works, are totally interwoven. In the 17th-century Dutch still-lives that these works reference, the flowers are loaded with insects, and drops of water hang off many of the leaves creating the illusion of a moment frozen in time. I chose to get rid of these elements as I want a less specific timeframe in my initial figurative image. In a lot of paintings that I love there are different speeds of mark making, that provoke different speeds of looking. Paintings also evoke different periods of duration. Some paintings seem to represent an instant, some make you conscious of time spent making them, and others seem to encapsulate an eternal stasis. Sometime all three timeframes are folded into a single image.²⁵

In a more analogue way, Glenn Brown (b.1966) transforms appropriated images from art history by changing their scale, colour and mood. As the point of departure for his painting *Saint Bimbo* (fig. 25) Brown has taken a section of a larger painting of a cauliflower and a turnip by the 17th-century Florentine painter Bartolomeo Bimbi (1648–1725, also known as Bartolomeo del Bimbo) who specialised in painting still lifes for the court of Cosimo III de' Medici (1642–1723).²⁶ Although Brown is an admirer of the Italian baroque, in the words of critic Michael Bracewell, he is 'less concerned with the art-historical status of those works he appropriates than with their ability to serve his purpose – namely his epic exploration of paint and painting'.²⁷ Bimbo's still life is only one of a number of reference points for Brown, who has said:

I like the idea that by using multiple levels of appropriation my work resists specific placement within art history. The source subject matter may be 17th Century, but the colour is from Francisco Goya (1746–1828) entwined with Odilon Redon (1840–1916). The work is both drawing and painting. The work started out as a Baroque cross-hatched highly-detailed drawing in India ink, on top of which multiple

fine glazes of oil paint build up to form volumes, adding shadows and light. The cross-hatching used for the initial India ink drawing refers to the etching techniques of Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617), whilst the glazing techniques are from Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), amongst others.²⁸

Brown has written of the importance of fluidity and transformation to all of his paintings: 'The anthropomorphic qualities of the turnip I focused on animates and brings it to life. In my Dr Frankenstein hand, I created a multiple-eyed Polichinelle masquerading as a vulgar vegetable. He is a comic, cross-limbed Humpty-Dumpty character precariously sitting on the edge of a table.'²⁹

Like Pepys encountering the work of Verelst, viewers have expressed the desire to lick and touch the surfaces of Brown's paintings, for he renders the *trompe l'œil* illusion of expressive, painterly brushstrokes despite a uniformly flat surface.

The ceramic sculptures of Lindsey Mendick (b.1987) make no pretence of having any polite reserve, either with their surfaces or subject matter. Instead, references to *vanitas* paintings and *memento mori* burst out of the vessel: fish, skulls, flies and worms. Her exuberant pieces are replete with gothic humour: darkness combined with lightness of touch. While these may also include reminders of our mortality, it is as if Mendick is saying 'we're all going to die so we may as well enjoy ourselves first'.

During the past 350 years, the history of still life in Britain has been a history of the movement of artists and ideas: many of its protagonists have either moved to Britain from abroad, are the children of migrants, or have looked to inspiration from artists from overseas. But while it was once viewed as a 'lowly' form of art, over the past century it has been employed by many of Britain's leading artists. It is striking that, for a genre so concerned with the passing of time, it remains almost timeless today. The celebrated art historian E.H. Gombrich expressed this succinctly:

The still life is compelled to challenge and at the same time perpetuate tradition. Without the elements of recognition and comparison, the discovery of the familiar in the unfamiliar, the genre would lose its meaning.²⁸

Fig. 29
Lindsey Mendick (b.1987)
*That wriggled and jiggled and tickled
inside her*, 2024 (work in progress)
*Still life with hermit crabs and tooth
extraction*, 2024 (work in progress)
Glazed ceramic, 63 x 35cm, 68 x 54 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Carl
Freedman Gallery, Margate

