STUDIO

ROBERT ZELLER

NEW SURREALISM

THE UNCANNY IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

INTRODUCTION

The centennial anniversary of Surrealism, 1924-2024, is upon us and the influence of the movement is still quite evident in contemporary art. This book's mission is to provide a brief history of Surrealism, show the relevance of its influence in contemporary art, and explore how elements of it are put into practice in artists' studios a century later. While *New Surrealism* did not write itself, I certainly never lacked for source material in assembling it. With over a hundred years of timeline to work with, the hardest part of my job was editing the manuscript down to a manageable size and making the cuts necessary to accommodate the spatial limitations afforded it. The focus was on painting and composition, so though I do give Surrealist literature some mention, it is regrettably not expanded upon. Surrealist sculpture is not given its due at all—a decision that some, understandably, will not agree with. But I had finite space to work with and subject matter with limitless possibilities. Something had to give.

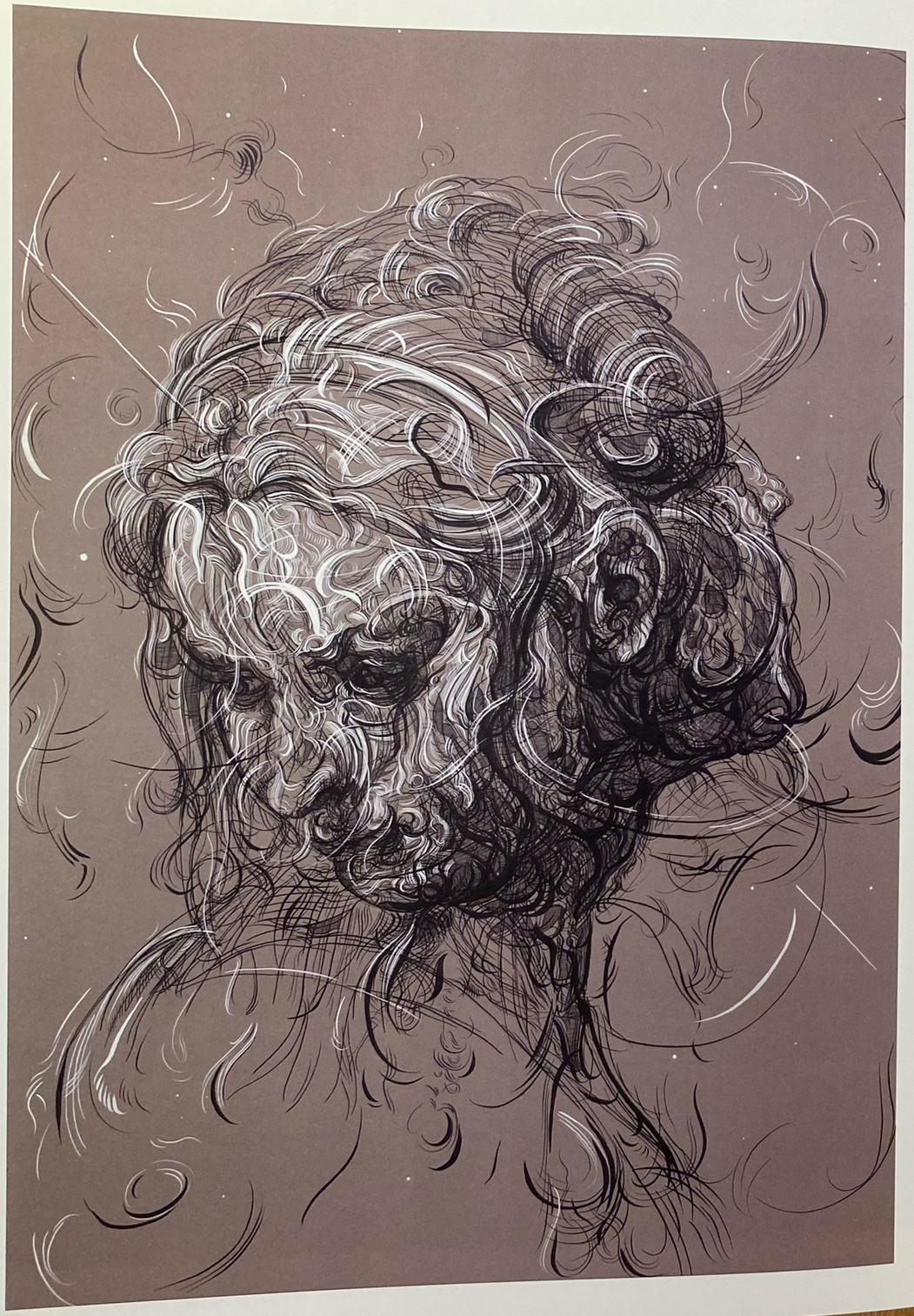
In Section I, which offers a brief synopsis of historical Surrealism, I decided to start the book just before the beginning of the movement, in the midst of World War I and the birth of Dada. This allowed the most important players and events to emerge as they came up in the timeline. With room for only the major figures, many minor players—though of interest to me personally—did not get included. This timeline-centric approach had its benefits, though. It resulted in the stories of the female Surrealists being integrated with those of the men, not separate as if they existed in some parallel universe. The women were centered with the group beginning in the 1930s, and that is when they show up in the timeline. Which points to something quite unique about the Surrealists—a point often overlooked—in that they featured female artists in their group exhibitions at a time when very few in the art world took female artists seriously. André Breton gave many of these artists their first exposure in commercial galleries and art museums. Breton exhibited *no one* who fell short of his ideological standards of Surrealist purity, and regularly excommunicated artists of all stripes from the group, including close comrades. That he exhibited as many women as he did meant that he took them seriously as artists, and as equals to their male counterparts.

In my undergraduate and graduate art history classes, I noted a certain disdain for the Surrealists on the part of my professors. They were not taken as seriously as other early Modernist movements were on the merits of their collective artistic contributions. This poor assessment still strikes me as odd, because I've yet to meet the art historian who does not take the luminaries of historical Surrealism seriously as individual artists. Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Yves Tanguy, and many others are given their due as individuals but not as a collective group. Yet one hundred years after the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924, most of the other "revered" Modernist movements are long dead as influences on contemporary art, while Surrealism and its forbearer, Dada, are very much alive and relevant. Breton got his hoped-for revolution.

The two sections that are devoted to the work of contemporary artists could each have been their own books. Each new generation adapts Surrealist themes and influences to their own ends, and I curated the selection of artists in Section II based on the New Surrealist themes contained in their work. Inclusion in Section III was contingent on each artist sharing their studio practice to some degree and completing two surveys on Surrealism that I sent them. These surveys are presented in the beginning of Section III for any reader who cares to undertake answering the questions for themselves. As in Section I, spatial limitations meant that many artists were left out of Sections II and III who would have been included otherwise. In full disclosure, there were several artists whom I invited to participate who turned me down, and other suitable candidates who came to my attention only after I had already started to whittle the work down to manageable proportions. That is the way these things go.

In writing this overly ambitious project, I have done my best to tell a story that is both captivating and faithful to the facts. While fiction can convey truth, nonfiction is supposed to *be* true—though it still falls on the writer to tell a compelling story. Hopefully I have done that. As always, the reader will be the final judge of how well I have succeeded.

ABOVE: Glenn Brown, *When We Return You Won't Recognise Us* (detail), 2020, oil and acrylic on panel, 45 7/8 x 35 1/8 x 7/8 inches (116.5 x 89.3 x 2.2 cm) © Glenn Brown. Photo courtesy of Glenn Brown studio.



LEFT: Glenn Brown, *Let's Make Love and Listen to Death from Above*, 2017, oil on panel, 91 x 75 5/8 x 1 1/8 inches (231 x 192 x 2.8 cm). ©Glenn Brown. Photo by Mike Bruce.

OPPOSITE: Glenn Brown, *The Music of the Mountains*, 2016, India ink and acrylic on panel, 53 1/8 (h) x 37 3/8 (w) x 1 1/8 inches (d) (135 x 95 x 3 cm). © Glenn Brown. Photography by Mike Bruce.

GLENN BROWN

Few artists are as adept as Glenn Brown at combining different techniques from various periods of art history and bringing them to the present. Although much has been written regarding his "appropriation" of other artists' work, and although that controversy has certainly defined much of his career, it misses a major point: Brown's work is an interesting fusion of many things, from Renaissance concepts to Surrealism. He is a synthesizer who reinterprets and reinvents work he admires. My focus here is on the unique quality of line in both his drawings and paintings and on the Surrealist undercurrent in his work.

The artists of the sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance had a lyrical vivacity to their line, known as *designo*. An exact definition of *designo* is elusive, as the term carries much more weight than mere drawing or design.

It literally translates into English as "to designate" and "to describe." There is a mystical quality to perception that those artists were able to translate into oil paint, and their work reflects the humanistic philosophy that dominated that period. Their use of line was something abstracted from reality that they then refashioned to simulate the real world. Their drawings and paintings reflect the world not as seen by the eye but rather the mind.

To abbreviate a very long story: when realism in painting became quite literally a matter of strict perception and not one of the mind, *designo* was all but forgotten, relegated to mere affectation and seen as an element of kitsch. We live in a different age, so there can be no authentic restoration of designo as practiced in the sixteenth century. But Glenn Brown's rhythmic use of line is evocative of this more lyrical and vivacious usage.

His monochromatic portrait *The Music of the Mountains*, (see page 122) is a gem of gestural marks reminiscent of seventeenth-century Flemish painter Jacob Jordaens. In *Let's Make Love and Listen to Death from Above* (a title taken from a song by the Brazilian band CSS), we see an aerial view of the heavens à la Tiepolo or Rubens, with swirling cloud patterns and writhing figures in the sky. We look up to see a chiaroscuro chariot, drawn by winged horses, that evokes Baroque mannerisms, if done a bit tongue-in-cheek.

Designo continues to figure in Brown's more recent, more colorful work, in which there are also strong Surrealist elements of duality, doppelgängers, and archetypes. The two works shown on this spread, *The Crystal Escalator in the Palace of God Department Store* and *Black Ships Ate the Sky*, are both double portraits with a Janus motif that call to mind Kay Sage's bleak, otherworldly landscapes. That they are at once seemingly abstract and figurative is due to the dominance of rhythms that sometimes run counter to the surface form and at other times are descriptive of it. In some places this rhythm manifests itself as swirls of flesh, and in others as storm clouds. As seen in the work of sixteenth-century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the many smaller surface forms complete the larger, with an effect both beautiful and grotesque.

ABOVE: Glenn Brown, *The Crystal Escalator in the Palace of God Department Store*, 2019, oil and acrylic on panel, 78 3/8 x 48 1/8 inches (192.9 x 122 x 1 cm) panel, 83 7/8 x 54 3/8 x 3 1/2 (213 x 138 x 9 cm) in frame. ©Glenn Brown. Photography by def image.

OPPOSITE: Glenn Brown, *Black Ships Ate the Sky*, 2020, oil and acrylic on panel, 85 1/8 x 56 3/4 inches (216 x 144 x 2.2 cm) ©Glenn Brown. Photography by Glenn Brown studio.