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Glenn Brown

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IN 1991 GLENN BROWN, while still a student at Goldsmith's College, London, painted *Atom age vampire*, his first photorealist painting after a portrait by Frank Auerbach. It was the opening gambit in a career since devoted to a profound exploration of copying and modifying reproductions of works of art. *Atom age vampire* led to further paintings after Auerbach, and also after Karel Appel, in both cases rendering the thick brushmarks of the original in a flat 'photographic' manner.[1] The following year Brown re-painted Salvador Dalí's *Soft construction with boiled beans: premonition of civil war* (1936) in a stretched, anamorphic version, drawing on Dalí's own 'paranoiac' method. With the 1994 painting *Ornamental despair (painting for Ian Curtis) after Chris Foss*, science-fiction illustration joined Brown's list of sources, leading directly to fantastical revisions of John Martin's apocalyptic scenes. In these, as with paintings after Rembrandt and Fragonard, Brown deployed the same laborious style, reproducing perfectly the impasto paint marks or flat airbrushed imagery of the sources. If imitation is sincere flattery, appropriation, it might be said, is

severe flattening, a violent reduction of an image to mere surface.

In more recent work Brown has moved away from this often vampirish dependence on source images. He describes the 2004 painting *International velvet* as the moment he 'came of age' as a painter, completely abandoning the original (a painting by Georg Baselitz) in the process.[2] His flattened brushstrokes no longer needed a model, but could be created at will, invention taking precedence of replication. Another important step was to isolate the motif against an invented background, seen first in *Secondary modern* (1998), showing an Auerbach head against a soft-focus backdrop. Cutting loose from the source enabled Brown to intensify his Gothic-grotesque sensibility, heightening the feeling of unease and *dégoût* of his imagery to almost unbearable levels. One of his best paintings, *Sex* (2003), seems to be based on a *caballero* portrait, perhaps by El Greco, but the features are unnaturally stretched, the flesh cold and rotting, the eyes glistening with grotesque pathos.

An excellent display of Brown's recent painting and sculpture at **Gagosian Gallery, New York** (at 522 West 21st St.; closed 21st June), showed his ever-expanding range of old-master sources, but also a newly vital dialogue between painting and sculpture. Brown's sculptures are encrusted accumulations of oil paint, often made over an armature, or an existing sculpture. Since the

68. *Death of the Virgin*, by Glenn Brown. 2012. Panel, 230 by 172.5 cm. (Exh. Gagosian Gallery, New York).

2009 work *Monument to international socialism* he has been using antique bronze figure-groups as a support. *Nazareth* (2012; Fig.70) seems to be a landslide of oil paint onto the back of a bronze model of a horse (a replica of a modello for Nicolas Coustou's *Marly horses*), the title drily hinting at the figures beneath, and where they might be going with their aesthetic burden. The unwieldiness of these sculptures is part of their peculiar charm – *The glory of Spain* (2014) takes a figure of Il Santorello by the French sculptor Justin Chrysostome Sanson, and extends his tambourine with an ungainly limb of oil paint. Seen side by side, the sculpture brought out the humorous aspect of the paintings, their carnivalesque satire on the authority of the past.

Yet their is also a more serious side to Brown's method of appropriation. The works at Gagosian clearly evinced his Baroque sensibility, his fascination with painterly rhetoric, pictorial depth, and a sense of compositional unity. This he has found equally in Auerbach, de Kooning, Fragonard and Bernardo Strozzi. One of the best works in the exhibition, *The death of the Virgin* (Fig.68), is based on Boucher's *Enlèvement de Proserpine*, in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Quimper, although the Baroque figure-group of the original has been transformed into a mass of ghostly veiled figures, barely recognisable as such. Baroque weightlessness seems pushed to an extreme, the figures floating in a cold

70. *Nazareth*, by Glenn Brown. 2012. Oil paint on acrylic and bronze, 68 by 52 by 37 cm. (Exh. Gagosian Gallery, New York).

extraterrestrial space. The title, and also the smoky grisaille palette, are taken from an entirely different source, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's famous painting at Upton House.

Such a complex melding of image, title and palette is the basis for much of Brown's recent work. *The happiness in one's pocket*, a quotation from an interview with Baselitz, names a 2012 work based on a painting of a foot by Menzel (a motif also painted by Baselitz), rendered

69. *Everyone sang*, by Glenn Brown. 2014. Panel, 147 by 106 cm. (Exh. Gagosian Gallery, New York).

with colours taken from a Matisse (*The blue nude*). Courbet's *The origin of the world* provides the title for a version (2012) of Chardin's *La raie*; Dalí's *Necrophiliac springtime*, the title for a large 2013 landscape of fuming flowers taken from Strozzi, one of Brown's best flower paintings to date. Fantin-Latour's *Roses blanches et roses* (1883) is the source for two paintings, *Anna Bolena* (2012), the striking acid blue tones taken from early Picasso, giving an uncanny sense of three-dimensional depth, and *Everyone sang* (2014; Fig.69), a rather beautiful painting of a weightless bouquet, the colours from Degas, the title from a poem by Siegfried Sassoon marking the end of the First World War. One of the strangest paintings in the exhibition, *Titania awakes/love-in-idleness* (2014) shows an unidentifiable organic object, like a rotting animal joint, floating in a dark space; the forms are taken from Jean-Baptiste Oudry's *Still life with a calf's leg*, the title from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 'Love-in-Idleness' is the love-inspiring flower with which Oberon bewitches Titania, although it would be a misnomer for Brown's own labour-intensive approach.

These collations are dizzying, and one almost prefers to remain ignorant, given the overload of information. Yet the complexity is also the token of a much more nuanced relationship to the art of the past than the simple replication and flattening of the early *Atom age vampire*. The cynicism of this conceptual gesture, intended to discredit the source and empty it of meaning, appears to have transformed into something bordering on a fanatical love for historical painting. Brown's technique is often described as virtuosic, and the word seems doubly appropriate to describe not only the refinements of his technique but also his ever-increasing taste for the art of the past.

[1]   *Atom age vampire* was preceded in the same year by two paintings based on abstract reliefs by Ben Nicholson, which form the first two numbered works in Brown's (unpublished) catalogue raisonné.
[2]   Conversation with the present writer, May 2014.