

The thinking man's painter

Glenn Brown is an art-world secret, much collected but underrated — until now. Waldemar Januszczak on a revealing retrospective

To Liverpool, where it is safe to venture again now the European Capital of Culture thing is over. Why do cities do this to themselves? Poor old Liverpool has spent four years as a pile of rubble surrounded by puddles. The civic heart of the city has been ripped out and replaced by a ground-to-sky display of glass brought in from rent-a-centre. The great views across the Mersey have been destroyed for ever by bad architecture and brutal development. Who needs Hurricane Katrina when you have the European Capital of Culture?

Making it all worse is the grotesque employment of the arts as an excuse. Call me old-fashioned, but knocking down a city to put on a Paul McCartney concert does not constitute a meaningful contribution to culture. Where is the great architecture to emerge from Liverpool 2008? Where are the great pieces of writing? The new plays? The new art movements? The once-in-a-lifetime performances of Beethoven? There are none. Because in this grim instance, the European Capital of Culture was treated as the European Capital of Marketing. And where there used to be Liverpool, there is now a place that looks just like everywhere else.

That said, as soon as you step out of the station, an office-sized banner welcomes you to Liverpool 2008, like some sad Christmas decoration nobody can be bothered to take down. And, of course, the building work isn't

finished, either. There are countless pockets of mucky rubble between you and Tate Liverpool. Plenty of "For sale" signs dangle from unwanted towers. Plenty of slabs of lurid brick await their first graffito.

Into this grim display of 21st-century British entropy, however, a hero has now stridden. A real artist, with real talent and big things to say. His name is Glenn Brown, and he was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2000. Brown's work is so popular that private collectors greedily gobble it up: you hardly ever see it in public. Fortunately, Tate Liverpool has granted him a mid-career show that looks back at what he has achieved to date. Which is far more than I imagined.

On paper, he belongs to that indistinct generation that emerged just after the Brit Artists, in the mid-1990s. But he is the same age as Damien Hirst, so we need to understand him as a slow beginner, or ditherer, who stayed in art school for longer than he should have. The earliest pictures here date from 1991, when he had not yet left Goldsmiths, even though he was 25. We are in the hands of one of art's slower gestators: a thinker, an absorber, a nerd.

The first paintings are duly problematic. The Day the World Turned Auerbach is typical. It shows what looks like a faithfully copied Frank Auerbach head, thickly done in that notoriously dense Auerbach manner that appears to involve the energetic



**'Growing creepier':
Glenn Brown's
Tart Wit, Wise
Humor (2007)**

it has gained a morbid blue cast and a startling new title: *On Hearing of the Death of My Mother*.

All this has been impeccably installed and paced to ward off any sense of repetition or lack of progress. For Brown's career to be profound as well as smart, the studenty questioning of reality that goes on at the start, with the copies of old masters and paraphrasing of big brush strokes, needed to lead to some strong personal expression. Which it does.

Long before the end, his doubts and darknesses have overgrown their sources and the messy, dense, chaotic brushwork we started with, and that we assumed had been borrowed from Auerbach for po-mo reasons, turns out to be a mucky personal preference.

This is a stunning display. It traces a peculiar but brilliant career arc. Where we might have expected slacker smartness, we get variety and doomy profundity.

The newest image in the show, painted this year, is a desolate grouping of giant apples going mouldy on a spooky green horizon. It's a hugely pessimistic vision of life, and if art told us the truth, then we would be right to fear the end that is predicted for us here. At the other end of his story, though, Brown has already warned us that art cannot be trusted and never tells the truth. So that's okay. 

Glenn Brown, Tate Liverpool, until May 10

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use of a broom and a shovel. When you get close, though, you see that this thick paint is not actually thickly painted. In fact, Brown has used a tiny brush to re-create, perfectly, every one of Auerbach's outrageously expressionist broom strokes. While a real Auerbach sticks out an inch or so from the canvas, with its hefty bulges of drying oils, Brown's version is as flat and smooth as a car bonnet.

It's a strange beginning. The simple act of painting has been turned into a conceptual minefield. Visual reality is being questioned by an artist who, we soon find out, is enough of a science-fiction buff to know that all visual realities are questionable. And the fact that Auerbach's original seems so full of raw and mannish emotion makes Brown's pseudo-scientific re-creation of it very spooky.

That he has an apocalyptic bent is made clearer by the spectacular

body of work that comes next: a fabulous roomful of sci-fi landscapes in which planets collide, stars go supernova, the earth turns red, the cosmos crumbles and all of earth's volcanoes seem to erupt at once. Copied from the paintings of Chris Foss and Tony Roberts, who are, I gather, well-known science-fiction illustrators, this is the kind of tremulous adolescent vision-mixing I would loathe if I encountered it on the cover of a Yes album. But one of Brown's pictorial ambitions is to investigate the

impact of different scales on the same image; and, amazingly, the intergalactic nonsenses of Foss and Roberts actually achieve a sublime sweep when repainted in this billboard size. The end of the world is excellently nigh. And what a grand spectacle it presents.

So far, so good. You would have thought, however, that constantly sampling the work of others and painting small versions of large brush strokes are pictorial gimmicks with limited potential. I worried that Brown's methods would quickly

grow tiresome. One of the reasons this display is so memorable, though, is that its opening gimmickry is soon overtaken, then overwhelmed, by authentic visions and emotions that seem to ooze out from the art itself. Just as the trifids took over earth, so Brown's blobs and bulges take over his work. And instead of being repetitive, the clever explorations of brush strokes, illusions, signature styles and sizes seem to lead him away from his sources and closer to himself.

As it darts this way and that in the history of art, looking for pictures to paraphrase, colonise and cannibalise, the show starts writhing and growing creepier. Gloomy and decrepit old men, borrowed from Rembrandt and El Greco, decompose before your eyes into cancerous warts and tumours. A rococo flower study, inspired by Fragonard, is buoyant enough in its first version, but by the next picture,