

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### THE VANCOUVER SUN

**Art, zombies, the dead and little green dogs**  
*U.K. artist Glenn Brown brings a fresh take to old paintings*

John Mackie



*Paintings by artist Glenn Brown at the Rennie Gallery in Vancouver, BC Friday, October 25, 2013.*

*Photograph by: Jason Payne , Vancouver Sun*

Glenn Brown has an unusual method of painting. He takes a print of a painting he likes, sets it beside a canvas, and then paints his own version.

Sometimes the changes from the original painting are quite subtle; sometimes his version is so different you can hardly see a trace of the original. In any case, his paintings have made him one of the most critically acclaimed artists in Britain. He is also one of the most successful — last year, one of his works sold at auction for £5.2 million (\$8.7 million).

Vancouver realtor Bob Rennie has been collecting Brown's work for several years. Recently, he mounted a show of Brown's work at his private art gallery in Chinatown, alongside work by another acclaimed British artist, Rebecca Warren. The show will continue until March 29, and you can register for a guided tour of the gallery at [www.renniecollection.org](http://www.renniecollection.org).

Brown's "appropriation" of other paintings is based on his philosophy that in the modern day, "nobody can quite have an original thought" anymore.

“Everything we know is based on things we’ve seen and been told, and most of the way that the world is presented to us is via second-hand information,” says Brown, 47, who was in Vancouver for the opening of the show.

“It’s from the television, the cinema, books we’ve read, magazines we’ve seen. Our understanding of pretty much everything is based on people’s opinions, and I just present that in a very straightforward way ...(I) appropriate other artists’ work and say you can’t have an original thought outside the language of the world that surrounds you.”

Brown has broad tastes, hence his paintings draw on a diverse assortment of artists, from Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin to science fiction illustrator Adolf Schaller and Victorian animal portraitist Edwin Landseer.

“I love art, all kinds of art, and I particularly like painting, whether it’s Rembrandt or Jasper Johns or Rubens or Jeff Koons,” says Brown.

“Right throughout the history of art, whether it’s a 15th century Breughel painting or something from the 21st century, I do like art. I like what it has to say, and I like the stories it tells.”

He turns to his painting *Zombies of the Stratosphere*, which draws its title from “a slightly bad b-movie from the 1950s.” But the beautiful vision of a woman floating towards an island has a much earlier inspiration, Arnold Böcklin’s 19th century painting *Isle of the Dead*.

“The (Böcklin) painting comes with peculiar politics, in that it was one of Hitler’s favourite paintings,” Brown said. “There’s another version of it that’s very similar that Böcklin did which Hitler stole during the war, and then later was recovered. He had it hanging in his office. It’s a politically charged image, if you know that.

“The original was commissioned by a woman whose husband had recently died. The painting depicts a woman rowing her dead husband in a coffin to an island that has crypts and caves for the dead body. The ghost of her husband is standing on the boat as she rows it.”

Brown’s changes from Böcklin’s original are slight.

“Mainly just a change of scale, a change of colour,” he notes.

“Small aspects of it have been picked out. They’re quite subtle, the changes on this one. Mainly the alteration is that it’s cut out, so that the painting now floats about five inches from the wall. Well, not float, it’s held up by a metal structure behind, but it appears to float, isolated from its original environment on the white wall.”

Landseer was reputed to be Queen Victoria’s favourite artist. In 1839, he painted *Dignity and Imprudence*, a portrait of two dogs that now hangs in the Tate Gallery in London.

In Landseer’s work, a big bloodhound and tiny terrier are framed by a window, like best buddies. In Brown’s version, the bloodhound still dominates the scene, but the terrier has been replaced by a small skull.

And everything is green.

“The green gives it a rather surreal, rather deathly pallor,” Brown says.

“I once was told that green was the least popular colour for paintings. If you wanted to sell a painting, if you make a green one it will be the last one that leaves the gallery, just because it doesn’t really go with furniture, I think is the main point.

“So it made me do a whole spate of green paintings. I like to be contrary.”

The most striking painting in the Rennie show is *The Ever-Popular Dead*, a dreamy seven-foot-tall, eight-foot-wide landscape that was inspired by Adolf Schaller’s 1982 painting *Jupiter Cloudscape*.

“It takes the bottom half of that, and re-renders it using colours based on a Van Gogh painting,” he says.

“Loosely. I’m inventive in the way I take things — nothing is presented quite accurately, a lot of artistic licence is put into something. But it’s a romantic landscape, a very large painting, with very peculiar, slightly dreamlike colours.

“I think the point of this painting is that it is like a dream. Or maybe a nightmare, even. You’re in the clouds looking down, and the clouds are starting to form into faces and heads, mutating into strange shapes.

“It probably took four or five months (to paint). I don’t make many paintings per year, (I do) five or six paintings per year on average.”

Brown grew up “in a very sort of rural environment” in Norfolk, 160 kilometres northeast of London. He knew he wanted to be an artist from childhood, but it took a while to establish himself.

His big break was when he was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2000.

“The Turner Prize is held once a year and picks four artists,” he says.

“It used to be every year in the Tate, now it’s in various different cities throughout England. It’s a fantastic opportunity. You’re given this big room in the Tate Gallery, thousands of people see it, it’s on television. You get a lot of publicity because of it.

“It has invigorated British audiences to contemporary art, because people become very aware of a lot of artists. People start arguing about who they think is the best, people bet on which artist they think is going to win. It has had a really fantastic effect on contemporary art in Britain. A lot of artists have become household names, which is quite unusual, I think.”

Today his work is sold in galleries around the world (London, Berlin, New York, Los Angeles). Asked how many private galleries there are like Rennie’s spectacular space in the historic Wing Sang building, he says very few.

“In London, I can probably say that there’s two, the Saatchi Gallery being one of them,” he says.

“There’s very few in America, as far as I understand. There’s odd ones dotted around, but they’re few and far between, and not usually as beautiful as this, I have to say.

“(It’s) just a beautiful space that has beautiful light and lighting. It’s a nice environment to look at work, hopefully. It lets the work sing, rather than the architecture shouting too much.”