

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

frieze

Glenn Brown

Dan Fox



Glenn Brown, Necrophiliac Springtime, 2013, oil on panel, 2 × 2.3 m

‘Eww, no – it’s so macho!’ said my friend when I brought up the topic of Glenn Brown’s recent exhibition at Gagosian’s West 21st Street gallery. I wondered what she thought was macho about it. The scale? Certainly, most of these new paintings are at least two or three metres wide, their companion sculptures of bodies and flowers housed in bulky vitrines. Perhaps it was their subject matter: were these vague nods to classical allegory or echoes of baroque painting? Male artists, after all, often love to think of themselves as players in art history’s grand narrative. But, to my eyes, Brown’s exhibition – his first solo show in New York since 2007 – wasn’t so much macho as neurotic. It was a skilled evocation of curdling civilization, a vision of Western art gone rancid.

As if to conjure the atmosphere of a grand old museum housing classical relics, the gallery was dimly lit and the walls covered in dark paint. But the paint was a sludgy brown – the colour of sewage and swill, of all the colours of the palette mixed together. Each painting and sculpture glowed in the sepulchral light, emanating rot and radiation sickness. An old, bearded man – perhaps a god or mythical seer – had noxious green skin (*In My Time of Dying*, 2014). Another, with a plaintive gaze and wearing a beret that screamed either ‘Dutch Renaissance painter’ or ‘mid-life crisis’, was jaundice yellow, his face streaked with scarlet lines like burst blood vessels (*Reproduction*, 2014). In *The Death of The Virgin* (2012), marble-cold limbs appear fused together, mutant. *The Happiness in One’s Pocket* (2014) shows a giant foot that looks like it could belong to the Colossus of Rhodes if it were suffering from a virulent, flesh-eating fungus. In *Necrophiliac Springtime* (2013), steam or smoke rises from a vase of flowers wilting in a

Salvador Dalí-esque landscape; plants sick with heat. This is art left to decay in the uninhabitable climate of a dying planet. (An echo of Brown's idea of art gone-to-seed could be found in Urs Fischer's cracked and ruinous homages to classical sculpture exhibited concurrently at Gagosian's uptown space and in an old bank on the Lower East Side.)

Brown's signature painting style is trompe l'oeil impasto; thick and viscous from a distance, but iron-flat up close. This creates a sense of highly-strung tension. His deliquescent and often tortured-looking subjects appear to have been trapped in an airtight, two-dimensional limbo: rococo and London school expressionism exiled to Flatland. They look like the work of an artist trying to press his references behind glass; to silence and inspect the influences that make him so anxious. And what curious influences Brown has: Frank Auerbach, François Boucher, Dalí, Chris Foss. It is as if Brown is trying to process the twin streams of inspiration that shape every artist. There are the ones that establish you publicly as an artist respectful of art history and scholarship – in Brown's case, surrealism, appropriation, the mannerists – and then there are the ones you keep secret, which stained your imagination as a teenager staring at the covers of progressive rock records and science fiction paperbacks.

Science fiction may well be the engine powering Brown's work. His figures in this eerie show appear against an inky cosmos, the still lifes set against alien landscapes. Some look like photos from the Hubble Space Telescope of columns of interstellar gas transforming into classical gods. Brown's paintings might also suggest time reversed, a parallel universe in which the established Old Masters were Auerbach, George Condo and Peter Saul, now studiously copied by upstarts such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard, John Martin and Anthony van Dyck. Art historians take note: in space, no one can hear you scream.