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# The Telegraph

ART  
GLENN BROWN

## 'I am the Stilton cheese of painting'

British artist Glenn Brown  
tells *Alastair Sooke* why he  
strives for pictures that are  
both charming and repellent

**P**eople like to be irritated," says Glenn Brown, the 51-year-old British artist, a thin, ascetic-looking man, with a neat grey beard, and a dry sense of humour. "And I like to irritate them, because it's fun." Wearing a smart navy tie, with white polka dots, and a burgundy cardigan, Brown hardly looks like a provocateur. Yet, in common with his peers among the so-called YBA (Young British Artists) generation, Brown, who was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2000, produces cheeky art animated by a confrontational, contrary spirit.

Consider his strange oil painting – based on a 17th-century panel produced in Rembrandt's workshop depicting a laughing young man – which faces us across Brown's tidy studio in Shoreditch, east London. One of a dozen new paintings to feature in *Come to Dust*, his first London exhibition since 2009 (also the year of his retrospective at Tate Liverpool), it was inspired by a project at The Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam, which culminated in a show there last year.

In three related pictures, Brown subjected the same source, which may depict Rembrandt himself, to a series of grotesque and comical transformations, such as painting his bulbous nose bright red. "I turned him into a ridiculous, untrustworthy, spiteful-looking clown," he explains, "covered in sores, and with a blue face."

Why? "Well, in many ways, my work is quite pop: it's funny, satirical. Here, I'm taking the mickey out of the way that people look at Rembrandt as this serious, holier-than-thou figure." He pauses. "But I still want you to be charmed by him. I hope that he is charming and repellent in equal measure."

Since the start of his career, Brown has "appropriated" – or reworked – art by other people. As he puts it: "All my work is based on other artists' work. I never paint a nude, but a painting of a nude." When he was younger, he based several paintings on

sci-fi illustrations – one enormous example, the 2m x 3m *Ornamental Despair* (1994), which reworked an image by Chris Foss (who also, incidentally, illustrated *The Joy of Sex*), sold at Sotheby's in 2013 for £3.5 million.

Now, though, Brown prefers to range freely through art history, alighting, he says, on "anything from the 16th to the 20th centuries", be it Raphael or Delacroix. What is he looking for, when choosing images to adapt? "Interesting brushstrokes," he replies, at once. "There has to be fluidity in the mark-making. The subject matter can be anything – landscape, nude, portrait, still life – that's not important."

After more than two decades, why is he still so obsessed with appropriation? "Because everybody does it, they just don't admit it to themselves," he says. "We live in a completely artificial environment," he continues. "I haven't communed with an animal or a tree today: everything I've touched has been man-made. If I painted a vase or a table, that would also be man-made, somebody else's design – so you could say even that's appropriation." In other words, as well as being playfully postmodern, Brown's work articulates something of the experience of living in a synthetic modern world. "Also," he deadpans, "I don't like a blank canvas."

Brown's burlesque of Rembrandt is typical of his output in another way, too, since it is executed with a flawless, meticulous technique



**REMBRANDT REMASTERED**  
*They Slipped the Surly Bonds of Earth and Touched the Face of God* (2017)



**GOOD HEAVENS**  
Glenn Brown's  
*Let's Make Love and Listen to Death from Above* (2017)

that has become a hallmark. After planning his compositions on a computer, using Photoshop, Brown paints slowly and precisely, with long, thin brushes, patiently laying down the sheerest of surfaces. "I sit for more than a thousand hours in front of each painting," he says. "I don't make very much work." Indeed, he rarely finishes more than six paintings a year.

**A**t this point, Brown's husband and studio manager, Edgar Laguna, with whom he has been in a relationship since 2004, interjects, teasingly describing the artist as "insular". Brown concedes that "painting is an anti-social activity, because you have to be on your own." But "even if it is a solitary experience, I like making art more than most things. I like communicating with people, but my medium is less vocal, more paint."

The results of all this time alone in the studio are uncanny, not least because so many of his often-headless figures have blue or green-skinned flesh, pockmarked with pestilential sores, as though they were rotting before our eyes. "I like to depict the human figure in various states of trauma."

Brown says. "Whether we like it or not, we live with a sense of death."

Moreover, what look, from a distance, like thick and textured brushstrokes in Brown's paintings turn out, on closer inspection, to be entirely smooth. This engenders

**'I sit for more than a thousand hours in front of each picture. I don't make many'**

a double take that, he says, "a lot of people find irritating, because they don't like completely flat surfaces". But, he continues, smiling: "People like eating things which are slightly unpleasant. [My work] is the stilton cheese or ripe camembert of painting: it's not to everybody's taste." Besides, he says, it would be wrong to call his painstaking approach "expressionless": "It's not as if I feel devoid of expression. I don't feel pent up. I just don't think you have to throw paint at a canvas to express yourself."

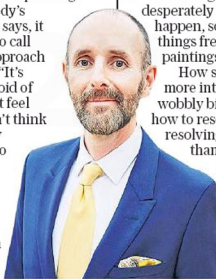
As well as paintings, the Gagosian exhibition will feature more than 30 drawings, mostly produced

in Suffolk, where Brown, who was born outside Newcastle but grew up in "rural" Norfolk, has a second house and studio. They represent a major shift of direction for the artist: "About four years ago, I started drawing," he explains, "because that was the one thing I didn't really do. It opened a whole new set of problems. Two and a half years later, I hadn't done any painting."

Dozens of finished drawings surround us in the studio, presented in ornate antique frames. As he says: "I use pre-existing images to go into pre-existing frames."

It takes courage to admit feeling inadequate, but, Brown says: "I started drawing because I was rubbish at it. You see so many artists who beyond the age of 40 start to go downhill. You desperately don't want that to happen, so you try to keep things fresh. Hopefully, my paintings have got better."

How so? "Just stronger, more intense. All the wobbly bits I didn't know how to resolve – now I'm resolving more of them than ever before."



**Glenn Brown: Come to Dust** is at Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London W1 (020 7495 1500), from Weds

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