

**Glenn Brown October 2013**  
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“People still don’t get it!” says Glenn Brown one sparkling October morning in his London studio. We are looking at a sequence of large unfinished paintings based on various historical sources, with nineteenth-century flower pictures by Henri Fantin-Latour and lesser-known seventeenth-century Italian works among them. The ‘it’ in the conversation stands for appropriation. Some time ago, around the beginning of the 1980s, appropriation was a favoured buzzword of informed artspeak. It was an elevated word for stealing, purloining, lifting, borrowing, filching, sampling. It referred to the borrowing of images, of styles, of cultural materials in general. The word mattered because it carried with it a polemical force that promised to cut the ground from under notions of originality and progress. It proposed a very broad critique that went well beyond the institutional confines of art. Ideas of newness, originality and progress were and arguably still are central to the self-images of our time. They are assumptions that bind horizons of expectation across our cultures by forming a common ground against which disparate fields – arts, sciences, humanities, technology, politics, economics – measure themselves. All of them apparently value newness, progress and – it truly goes without saying – originality. In Brown’s view it was the destabilizing of those assumptions that mattered in appropriation and still does matter. That is the ‘it’ that we still don’t get. We have not learned to unlearn our fascination for a false god called progress. That is as much a matter for art – with its modern cults of endless radical invention and the cherished ‘breakthrough’ – as it is for our culture at large.

There is no question that Brown regards himself as an artist affiliated with appropriation. “I always appropriate, so that I can never fully be myself...”,<sup>1</sup> he has said. Yet his work feels quite unlike the art of the 1980s that is usually associated with the term, such as the early works of Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince or the paintings of Mike Bidlo. Levine aped the look of a Kandinsky watercolour here, digitized Monet and famously rephotographed Walker Evans there. Prince rephotographed Marlboro ads, among many other things, and Bidlo meticulously copied the varied signature styles of disparate high modernist painters. Appropriation signalled a powerful and principled scepticism about the privilege of the artist-author and an explicit annihilation of its heroic modernist variant. It could also be understood as a moratorium on image-creation as such. In the view of the appropriationists, the world already contained enough, or too many, images. The *tabula* was never *rasa*. Hence there was no need for more to be imagined by artists or anyone else.

The task of the artist, exemplified by Prince, was to interrogate the images that were already out there, rather than to create new ones. Interrogation meant blindsiding the image, catching its spectacular charms unawares and off guard, so to speak, coming up too close for comfort, gazing at it obliquely. None of this required the construction or invention of images in compositional terms. Instead it took an existing image as a site of investigation and object of scrutiny. That object under scrutiny could be cropped, fragmented, magnified, distorted. Despite the vast differences between Brown’s practice and the now canonical Appropriation Art of the 1980s, Brown has remained remarkably faithful to these rules of engagement. His works, or at least the paintings, always begin with a source image (or what in Duchamp’s terms can be called a readymade) that is appropriated. That image is then treated and ‘softened up’ if necessary. It might be stretched and morphed, recoloured, perhaps relocated onto an unfamiliar backdrop. Finally it is named by giving it a title, which is also a piece of appropriated language that

is borrowed and tweaked if necessary. Whatever the artist's role, it is not that of the form giver or style maker. Under the spell of appropriation, the artist is first and foremost a receiver of images. She or he is dealt a hand of visual signs and visual encounters within which the old difference between copy and original is uncertain and unimportant.

Brown's great insight in the early 1990s was that he could yoke a painting technique derived from photorealism to the image-scrutinising appropriationist approach of Levine and Prince. He had already looked intently at the work of Rosenquist and Richter and had learned how to create the ultra-smooth, uninflected continuous paint surface that was crucial for producing the reality effect of photographically generated imagery. Indeed it was the extreme physical flatness and uninterrupted smoothness of the paint surface that was remarkable in Brown's early work, just as it remains today. Around 1990–91 Brown grasped that the discrepancy between the relentless flatness of the real paint surface and the defined shallow relief of the depicted surfaces that they re-presented would be the emotional and intellectual heart of his work. Henceforth the paintings would play up this discrepancy by confronting the viewer with a levelled and polished paint surface that depicted a mass of gouged and compressed material in the guise of exquisitely rendered trompe l'oeil brushmarks, pushed back somewhere beyond the picture plane. It is vital for the affective force of these paintings that "The brushmarks are behind the picture plane" <sup>2</sup>. With that in mind, he proceeded to think through and work through a variety of relief surfaces in the paintings. These included the crater-strewn lunar surface, constructed relief paintings by Ben Nicholson, and eventually the super-impasto surfaces of well-known modernist paintings, the latter heralded by his first representation of an Auerbach painting in 1991. Fittingly titled *The Day the World Turned Auerbach*, this painting marked a major discovery. That is not too strong a word for what happened and what came to be opened up by sourcing an extraordinary series of works in Auerbach images. The fundamental intervention made by this series, which continues to resound through contemporary painting today, was to 'dematerialise' painting.<sup>3</sup> Or, to adapt a Christian term, it was absolutely a question of dis-incarnation.

Brown intuitively grasped that everything modern painting had staked on the materiality of its pigments, its gestures and surfaces – from Soutine to Ryman, and from de Kooning to Schnabel – all of that had to go. And not only did it have to go: it had to be neutralized within the painting itself. Hence the task of the painting would be to overtly oppose the materiality of modernist painting. This was a brilliant and, I believe, unprecedented move. Brown invented a new kind of painting that dematerialised another painting in front of your eyes. To some limited extent this was anticipated by certain important paintings by Gerhard Richter, like the coincidentally titled *Detail (Brown)* (1970, Richter number 271), which reproduced massively blown-up details of oozing, rippling swirls of paint. But although Richter's *Detail* paintings might have rehearsed the technical approach that Glenn Brown would adapt to make paint depict paint, they never touched at all on the issue of authorship. In the Richter pieces the depicted paint was just arbitrary viscous matter. In Brown's work it was *authored* viscous matter. That difference made a big difference. It was a shift that had immense consequences. The advent of appropriation was what made possible this introjection of a prior author into the work. What remained close to the spirit of appropriation too was the confrontation in the paintings between an emotionally neutral plane of scrutiny and the emotionally charged object of its gaze. The cool detachment registered by Brown's surfaceless picture plane had to be grasped by the viewer in total opposition to the emotional plenitude of the encrusted source image. This also functioned on another level as a confrontation between the fraught, desirous modernist gaze and the decentred, self-effacing, evacuated postmodern subject.

Although he made an extended sequence of pictures (including *Kill the Poor* and *Kindertransport*) from one single source in 1999–2000, Brown has never, to my knowledge, set up or planned the Auerbach group of works explicitly as a series in any

programmatically. But certainly he has made more works from sources in Auerbach than from any other artist. Today he continues to look carefully at Auerbach, perhaps pondering further works, though it is now (writing in 2013) some time since he has worked from this artist. The Rennie Collection's wonderful painting *Seligspredung* (2000) is a work that came at a transitional phase in the series. At the end of the 1990s Brown started to give himself more license to play with his sources. He allowed himself to deviate from the script more. Instead of mainly mapping, distilling and cooling down the sourced brushstrokes, as he had done up until then, his paintings of around 1999 and 2000 began to imagine Auerbach's brushstrokes floating in space. The quoted gestures became increasingly gaseous and weightless, as if levitating and vaporizing in front of our eyes. The next step was to imagine looking behind the free-floating marks and posing them as a mask for an absent persona: a mask of brushstrokes concealing an empty space. In Auerbach's portrait paintings there is the sense of a worked-through trade-off between schematic line drawing and pigment mass that arrives at one out of many possible appearances of a face. This implies a human core separate from fleeting surface effects, a person who is more than the sum of his or her appearances. But in *Seligspredung* and *Beatification* the face is rendered as pure mask, so that the core that ought to be behind it is revealed as materially and psychologically void.

*Seligspredung* marks an important moment in the development of Brown's paintings. It shares a common source with the two superb 1999 works, *Beatification* and *Mark E Smith as Pope Innocent X*. In these paintings Brown started to separate the figure from the ground by restricting the re-presented brushmarks to the figure. That might sound rather rudimentary. But it was a significant step in freeing up the arena that the paintings made available to themselves. Previous Auerbach-based works had reproduced all the sourced brushstrokes, which of course included those that depicted the heads as well as those that made up the background. Indeed, this equalization of figure and ground at the level of the real paint surface was emblematic of Auerbach's modernism. By choosing to separate figure and ground so emphatically in *Beatification* and *Seligspredung* Brown both underscored his own post-modernism and returned the brushmarked modernist man to the shadowy realm of the Old Masters. This still feels extraordinary. Like much great painting, it seems incredibly simple and incredibly complex all at the same time.

With *Seligspredung* there is also the question of pathos. Perhaps it will always be the case that one person's pathos is another's sentimentality. And sentimentality is something we tell ourselves to guard against in serious, tough-minded art. No accident then that Brown chose the title *Anaesthesia* for his reworking of the cute double doggy portrait by nineteenth-century British painter and dog lover Edwin Landseer. Whatever the huge range of contested opinions about the proper task of contemporary art, the prevailing consensus is still that art's supposedly necessary reflexivity and self-criticality must rule out sentimental images, except where they are quoted as evidence against themselves. Insofar as an artist like Jeff Koons embraces icons of sentimentality, he does so – at least, at his best – by accelerating and monumentalizing them to a point where their energies are condensed into something other. It has been said that sentimentality often goes hand in hand with cruelty, that the two require each other. That the callous tyrant who oversaw a pogrom was the same person who daily indulged lapdogs with baby talk and tender caresses. Perhaps for that reason it is necessary for Brown to maintain a tone of violence throughout his work. Frequently it is explicitly invoked by the phrasing of titles such as *Kill the Poor* or *Kindertransport* or *They Threw Us All in a Pit and Built a Monument on Top*. Other times it is visualized as the dismemberment of bodies or the dissolution of flesh.

The recurrence of violence in the work is worth considering. We could think of it via the cliché that cultural refinement comes at a cost of brutality somewhere, paid for by someone, some victim who remains unseen, offstage or out of frame. That was the gist

of Walter Benjamin's chestnut about every accomplishment of civilization being simultaneously an accomplishment of barbarity. I can't help seeing the double oval panel painting *They Threw Us All in a Pit and Built a Monument on Top* as a fable of the French revolution, in which a ruling and art-collecting elite is brutally exterminated, then buried, and the art they patronized congeals, festers and rots into obscurity (which is almost exactly what happened to Fragonard's work after his collectors were guillotined or exiled in the 1790s). Brown himself prefers to be ambivalent about what the title suggests, pointing out that the ones tossed into said pit could equally be plague victims (indeed, ancient plague burial pits are regularly disturbed by foundation work for new buildings in the financial district of twenty-first-century London, not far from Brown's studio). The violence that echoes around the body of work has several registers. In *Anaesthesia* the violence is of course the other to Landseer's anaesthetizing sentimentality, which tranquilizes those antennae that might otherwise notice cruelty. In *Seventeen Seconds* it is many things. It is the potential violence that is always implied by the vulnerability of the body as a sentient being. It is also the multiple violences associated with the orifice, both in terms of the body's penetrability, the orifice as threshold between interior and exterior, and the sheer ontological violence of dependence upon an other 'body' (whether that 'body' be meat, food or breast or genitals), with the commensurate loss of subjective autonomy that the orifice implies. Finally, there is the overall violence associated with the dematerialisation of Brown's paintings or what we might call their material disengagement. This is akin to the wish of the person faced with a threatening and visceral calamity who would prefer watching it on TV. To screen oneself off at a safe remove from vulnerability and suffering whilst still observing it is also to do violence. A voyeuristic violence.

As the audience for Brown's paintings, we seem to constantly oscillate between entering into the fantasized real of the brushmarked realm and holding back to enjoy our optical distance from this safe side of the picture plane. Put like that, the viewing process sounds almost pornographic. The sense of vision is always, in Merleau-Ponty's words, a 'distance sense', and therefore one that lends itself to a voyeuristic remove. Yet the reality is that the mind is constantly immersed in a process of synthesizing visual cues with tactile experience. What feels like pure detached vision contains memories and anticipations of touch, and it structures itself through that tactile knowledge. The kinaesthetic unity of sight and touch was thematized in de Kooning's paintings. So much of the thick, gestural viscosity of pigment in modern painting had to do exactly with this theme. It was in large part a utopian appeal to a moment of intensified sensory and bodily unity. A heightened moment of embodied self-presence. The gestural painters of high modernism, including Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell and surely Frank Auerbach too, were attempting to overcome the inbuilt voyeuristic remove that follows from the distanced character of the visual sense. To a degree, their works implied an almost therapeutic response to the lived separation of sight and touch. By maximizing the physical flatness and thickness of the gestures on the picture plane, their paintings proposed to locate the viewer as if in the same space as the depicted figures or forms. Brown's painterly project signals a decisive end to all that. There is still the spectacle of visualized tactility, but now it has been removed from the domain of the viewer and pushed back beyond the picture plane. If the violence of de Kooning's best paintings was one of excessive, intoxicating proximity, like a desperate embrace, then the violence of Brown's painting has very much to do with detachment, distance and the removal of presence.

Strong elements of pathos cum sentimentality operate throughout Brown's paintings *Anaesthesia*, *Seventeen Seconds* and *They Threw Us All in a Pit and Built a Monument on Top (Parts 1 and 2)* in the Rennie Collection. But these are of course neither straight sentiment nor straightforwardly distanced quotations of facile emotional appeals. Rather they operate as ventriloquisms of sentiment. Brown is akin to an actor rehearsing his

lines and practicing his body language, or a clandestine reader engaged in an illicit perusal of a private diary. There is a kind of self-inoculating pathos in play here that can also outrun the sources. For clearly the similitude of the drawing of the face in *Seligspredung* to Disney's Pinocchio forces the Auerbach persona into a state of banality that the source would thoroughly oppose at every level. In other words, Brown finds a pathos in Auerbach's portrait that Auerbach himself seems not to have been aware of. At first there is the pathos of an intensified modernist figure on its own terms, so far as they are still available to us now. But in the second instance it is the pathos of that figure and its creator for us as sceptical viewers, a 'we' for whom the terms of Auerbach's existential authenticity are no longer recoverable and no longer believable. Then, by extension, there is the simultaneity of the sense of this figure within its imagined world and the pathos of Auerbach's own unawareness. It's a sense that, like an effect of dramatic irony, threatens to make a clown of every Auerbach figure, who is always more Chaplinesque than heroic.

The mismatch between what Brown's ventriloquism invites us to see in the source image and what it seems to presume is somehow like the authentically existential pathos of imagining the once vigorous youth in the figure of a timeworn and gnarled old man. For there is a curious agelessness to the figure in *Seligspredung*, as indeed in all Auerbach's figures. The paintings never tell us whether they are old, young or middling. Perhaps that is part of the charm of the pictures: they imply a consciousness for all seasons that continues beneath the momentary states of ripeness or decay of the flesh. Brown then transposes this resonant agelessness to the stage of history, or at least, the history of art. Now the figure that could be young, old or in-between is also made historically ageless, suspended between the anxious existential drama of modernity and the intimate chiaroscuro space of seventeenth-century Europe. This is Auerbach inserted into the picture space of Rembrandt. The painting decomposes and reassembles the figure and makes it inhale the oxygen of a different and unfamiliar era. This is complex and fertile material indeed for an artist. But it is only arrived at through the conjunction of Brown's extraordinarily refined technical consistency with his insight that appropriation could be re-synthesized with photorealist painting.

As a method of thinking, Brown's approach has some affinities with Jacques Derrida's philosophical approach, which was always a matter not of grandly inventing new thoughts *ex nihilo*, but of reading past texts very closely; in many cases closer indeed than the writers themselves would have read them. Derrida's method (if one can use a term he would have distrusted) was to pressurize the reading of a source text enough to squeeze out conceptual inconsistencies and suppressed tensions, and then to bring them to the fore and scrutinise them. This approach has been called 'deconstruction'. One thing that tends to get lost with the label is the sense that Derrida often registered a kind of conceptual empathy with the sources that he dissected. His forensic readings of Heidegger in the book *Of Spirit* or of Rousseau and others in *Of Grammatology* seemingly contain a note of unspoken gratitude towards the source authors for giving the gift of their own fraught inconsistencies. Because for Derrida the fault line, the irreparable inconsistency or so-called *aporia* in a text *is* its hidden gift – the gift given precisely as the text strives to conceal and gloss over it. In other words, the *aporia* and its attempted concealment (through rhetoric, narrative, omission, caesura or whatever) is a genuine though unconscious attempt to think something crucial and inescapable. That is why it deserves so much forensic attention. Brown's modus operandi in the early paintings can clearly be understood in parallel to Derrida's ways of reading. And just as writing for Derrida is always an intensified mode of reading, so for Brown painting is always a matter of looking vigilantly, sceptically – though not disdainfully – at other painting.

A significant shift took place in the work during the first decade of the 2000s. It is traceable in works such as *Anaesthesia* and continues through the more recent paintings

*Carnival* (2011) and *Almond Blossom* (2010). Whereas Brown had started out carefully tracking the original paint marks in his sources, he began to let himself infect all kinds of other images with writhing, twisting brushmarks, as if paintings from almost any period could be reimagined as made up of gooey, syrupy, expressionistic brushmarks. This has been an important move that has opened up the scope of the work in several ways and has led Brown to become much more playful in departing from his sources. On the one hand it permits him to appropriate (in the old formal sense of 'take possession of', or make something one's property) any premodernist painting and subject it to the contamination of his particular flesh-eating painterly virus. On the other hand it lets him develop a new strand of images, such as *The Hinterland* (2006) and *They Threw Us All in a Pit and Built a Monument on Top (Part 2)*, in which amorphous, blob-like figures sit like abject Dr Seuss cast-offs, waiting for us to work out which way up their bodies are. The crudity of the figure/ground relations in these works is something that I suspect the younger Brown would not have allowed himself. But by invoking the invasive, contaminating brushstroke (within the infinite conceit that anything can be proposed as made up of them) here, Brown is able to create a wonderful internal complexity for these shapeless, homeless figures. That is what makes these paintings hum.

The three pieces *International Velvet* (2004), the Rennie Collection's *Seventeen Seconds* (2005) and *The Hinterland* are exemplary of this strand of the oeuvre. All three were painted around the same time, on panels of almost the same size at approximately 150 by 122 centimetres. They are paintings made in conversation with one another. The serpentine brushmarks that began as earnest structural vectors with the Auerbach transpositions are by now creamier, floppier and frothier and overtly confected. If the ghost of the existential modernist figure is still lurking there then, you feel, he has been corrupted by bad company of some sort, something like a combination of Jean-Honoré Fragonard and SpongeBob SquarePants. These pictures suggest the portrait format but have been scaled up both to amplify their flattened brushmarks and to set the stage for an ambiguous figural encounter. Taking their cue from Magritte, these three images flirt endlessly with the ambivalence between the face and the figure, the game of seeing the body as a face and the face as a body. The only unit of visual scale is provided by the brushmarks, which are of course semantically malleable. They stand for nothing except themselves as provisional moments of becoming-image. The brushmarks here have become the generic plasma of the visual: unformatted phenomena waiting to be assigned a depictive task. Because this plasma is figured as a simmering energy that is constantly in pursuit of semblances, it is entirely fitting that Brown starts to develop games of layered multiple images. The paint marks in *The Hinterland* are 'seen as' the finger of a hand and then the thumb is also seen as a phallus. At the top of the figure the two curved chunks of cosmetic red are also multiply readable: as brushmarks first; as the collar of a headless shirt second; and as the lips of a chaotically disfigured head third. *Seventeen Seconds* seems less forthright in its polyvalent imagery. But the painting is still a wellspring of dormant figures. Whatever form is there to be named is nowhere unambiguous. The central black void of the Cyclops eye socket is no less an arsehole, and the jagged Y-shaped form below it is both a mouth and a vagina. The painting welcomes these multiple interpretations and rewards them with more and more. As you spend time with the image it becomes hard to restrain the multiplication of figures. It is as if every area on the figural head is on the threshold of morphing into a new form. Above the 'eye' the green tinted areas imply a potential human form turning away from our view, while below it, another emergent molten figure is discernable. Once you have entertained the plethora of latent figures on offer, it is remarkable to find how convincingly the composite assemblage still reads as a head and one that even communicates a residual sense of character and, again, solicits our sense of pathos. It is correct, I think, to read the figure in *Seventeen Seconds* as female and the one in *The Hinterland* as male, though they are not securely gendered. The gender markers are fragmentary: a mouth-vagina here, a thumb-phallus there. Insofar as these figures are human figures at all they

are so because of their parts, not their unity.

The term 'postmodern' cropped up earlier in this text. But it is notable how it has been falling out of favour in current art discourse. What seemed in the 1980s to be a clear cultural and intellectual rupture, for which the label provided a name, now looks less defined. Or, for some commentators, what has become clearer from today's perspective is a deeper underlying continuity that makes the declaration of a postmodern breach look at best foolish, at worst deceitful. Peter Osborne, for one, in his ambitious recent book *Anywhere or Not At All* argues that postmodernism is a vacuous term with no real historical purchase. At stake in the vicissitudes of the term is the vast question of how we understand the entire global history of the last four decades and our artistic relation to it. Also, by extension the urgent historical question as to whether it still makes any sense to view our historical moment through the lens of an overarching project called modernism. The styles of modernist art looked to many of us in the 1990s to be dead and securely buried. Yet the first years of the 2000s saw a widespread rehashing of the look of a certain kind of classic modernist painting and sculpture, especially the sort loosely associated with Constructivism of the 1910s and 1920s. Perhaps that should not have been surprising. Perhaps art is always a business of reviving and revisiting its past styles. But what seemed striking in the 2000s revival of high modernist Constructivist chic was the total absence of any of the semantic weight of the original. This revival seemed to be genuinely nostalgic and a real yearning for a moment when once more artists could believe in the immanent political force of visual style as such. So could it be that the debased, style-oriented modernist pastiche of the 2000s is in fact an authentically postmodern art? Or, to extend the question, does this kind of art imply that there is a vital unfinished business of modernism still demanding critical attention, or, on the contrary, that modernism's entire possibility has been emphatically cancelled?

These debates might seem to be at a far remove from consideration of Glenn Brown's singular oeuvre. Yet I would argue that they are absolutely pertinent to his artistic project. These questions of course return us to the polemics associated with appropriation. What feels so odd about the recent advent of modernist pastiche is precisely that it reduces its antecedents to style as such. It is almost as if neo-modernist pastiche is precisely a mode of appropriation but without knowing it. Allied to its emptying of original content is an inevitable contradiction whereby an art of the modernist past that staked itself on radical invention and the annihilation of tradition gets recycled as a kind of heritage, a traditionalized avant-garde. In comparison to this, the longer historical reach of Brown's work stakes a very different claim. Yet Brown's position is not without its convolutions. On the one hand, his work stands as a sustained corrective to a hubristic modernist conceit of absolute newness. But on the other hand, like the Derridean counter-reading, Brown's pictorial enterprise is always deeply indebted to the paradoxical gift of the selected source that it overturns. That source began in Brown's early work as a paradigmatically and necessarily modernist one. In other words, Brown's body of work has been built upon the site of the modernist project, albeit the site of a ruined edifice, in his view. And when in recent works like *The Shallow End* or *Almond Blossom* a figure gets infected or colonized by brushwork from another period, that other period may be strictly unspecifiable but it must be broadly modernist. It must refer to a moment when the brushmark became loosened from its depictive function and was made autonomous. That of course was a modernist moment.

Glenn Brown's posture relative to art history is complex. It would be wrong to see the oeuvre as a disquisition on the histories of painting. Certainly Brown is steeped in those histories, yet the work should not be seen as a demand to restrict painting to the replaying of its past. Nor does it only assert the persistence of art historical chains: it can equally be seen as an appeal to reflect on our distance from the historical sources. The idea of a 'death of painting' has been reworked over and again since the invention of

photography. Although it might seem tempting to interpret Brown's work as a paradoxical improvisation at the scene of that alleged death, that would certainly be a mistake. Brown's work is absolutely in and of our time and committed to the continuity and futurity of painting. If there is a death to speak of then for Brown, it is the death of modernism and of the sovereign, autonomous modern subject in particular. Brown's work is absolutely concerned with describing the contours of that subject as it was figured in painting practices, and with assessing the consequences of its demise. From his point of view, the future of painting has to lie in its deeper continuities, instead of being enabled by revolutionary ruptures or radical shifts. Here the citational mode derived from appropriation is infinitely generative. Many artists today of course work from the starting point of fine-grained descriptions of architectural, social, historical or other empirical 'sites.' Brown's work treats its chosen sources as pictorial and historical sites that are no less layered than social spaces. When his brushmarks are introduced onto the source images to spread their spores and unleash their fungal growths, they operate as a delicate instrument of historical re-constellation. Of course this is not at all like the historical collaging in the cut-and-paste sense we might associate with postmodern painters of the 1980s like David Salle. Instead of highlighting the dramatic jolt of the historical shift, Brown's paintings accept and preserve the given unity of the source image, but then subject it to the pathology of the brushmarks, which contaminate it with microorganisms from another era. Brown's work insists that painting can still address the big questions of who we are and where we are in space, time and history. It indicates that we are no longer the breathless inventors of endless new dawns or the worshippers at the modern altar of tomorrowism. Instead, we are the recipients of rich and infinitely sedimented cultural materials and we are ready to adopt a different attitude that, like Brown's practice, is neither exactly active nor exactly passive. To march ahead towards an epic future would be to deny ourselves the time we need to make sense of the wealth of cultural debris already around us here and now. In Ashbery's words:

Remember, don't throw away  
The quadrant of unused situations just because they're here:  
They may not always be, and you haven't finished looking  
Through them all yet.<sup>4</sup>

As recipients, we are simultaneously suspicious and grateful. And because we experience ourselves as distributed across times and histories and stretched between distinct structures of feeling, we need to understand how we are always already dispersed. We are the we who are never fully ourselves.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Brown in conversation with Laurence Sillars, in *Glenn Brown*, London, Tate Publishing, 2009, p. 145.



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<sup>2</sup> Glenn Brown in conversation with John Chilver, February 2012.

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of Brown's work is developed in my essay 'If Display Becomes Materiality' in Edward Whittaker and Alex Landrum (eds.) *Painting with Architecture in Mind*, Bath, Wunderkammer Press, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> John Ashbery, from the poem 'Someone You Have Seen Before' in *April Galleons*, London, Carcanet Press, 1988.