

THE GLENN BROWN EFFECT: A WEIRD SCIENCE

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"Out of her face, her dress and her gestures, out of practically nothing at all, I have made up this woman's story, or rather legend, and sometimes tell it to myself and weep..."

Perhaps you will say 'Are you sure your story is the real one?' But what does it matter what reality is outside myself, so long as it has helped me to live, to feel that I am and what I am?"¹

My experience of Glenn Brown's painting is a discourse which has occurred over a long period. A sometimes oblique conversation through painting. Re-reading and re-editing my notes involving Glenn from 1992 onwards I have assembled a journal. This journal is the portrait of a 'Weird Science'; the intimacy of an errant knowledge.

Summer 1992. (Exercise One).

It occurs to me that, working in the busy art museum shop, the postcards dealt to me begin to produce within each sale, a profile of each individual customer, an outline of their desire. I start to believe that an idea of people's deepest wishes is defined by the cards dealt to me. The swift succession of these topsy turvy reproductions begins, in the unexpected links between their miniature images, to involve me in the powerful hallucination that I am looking into a customer's inner life. Discussing this distraction with Glenn I feel that we share this reverie of fortune telling. That we are both gripped by the delusion that we hold people's fortunes in our hands.

Autumn 1992.

The shared laughter provoked by turning one of his paintings upside down and arranging others in different configurations, coincides with a realisation that the basis of a shared kind of thinking was being put together; a surface that we at least have in common. I sense that this thinking is a powerful thing, a sense which is reinforced by reading about the beliefs of medieval rhetoric in which thinking itself ('*cogitato*') was the ability to combine '*imagines*' from a treasure trove of memories. The medieval scholars defined such memories as '*phantasms*'². This reading helps me understand how it is that I can see the postcards handed to me in a shop as the indexes of an imagination.

Spring 1994.

At the opening of Glenn's show at Richard Salmon Ltd, in a building which used to be an old Victorian painting studio, I find myself caught up in a dance of reflections and references.

On the green painted wall of the dealer's office, Glenn has hung his *Ornamental Despair (Painting for Ian Curtis) after Chris Foss*. In the context of this installation, I see what he means about the influence of John Martin's Triptych in the Tate Gallery. The apocalyptic Victorian paintings haunt its surface. On a nearby wall he has hung the borrowed Martin etchings of *Plains of Heaven* and *Day of Judgement*. There, on the sideboard, he has placed a photocopy of Ian Curtis's wedding portrait which he has cropped to include only Ian's smiling figure. He has framed it as a nostalgic family memento (Dead, suicided Icon). I remember that *Ornamental Despair* is the title of a Julian Schnabel painting which uses the imagery of Joy Division's album cover; *Closer*. Ian Curtis is the dead singer of Joy Division.

Later, in the pub, I mention the Schnabel painting to Glenn; we smile. I feel that these questionable Icons form into a strange kind of chorus; singing ghosts.

Note. Early 1994. (*Head*).

The images which Glenn has painted begin to form a repertoire, they deal us a process of thinking through a kind of portraiture. It is a weird kind of portraiture in which its iconic nature struggles to survive. The way that this painting works is as a simulation of a morality of individualism, the morality on which painting a portrait is based. By the simple act of painting a likeness of a portrait, Glenn causes a split... the start of many. His paintings are, despite their careful appearance, a kind of crisis of the icon where the image of an individual enters a dimension which threatens to tear it apart.

The painting he is working on (D. has suggested that he call it 'Head') is an Auerbach portrait cropped down the centre of its face and then turned on its side. It is genuinely delirious and seems to inhabit a drug vision. There is something morbid about its romance. The end of something. Its territory does seem to be that of the mind of a drug taker. It is knowledge of a life lived on the basis of a shattered dream. I'll have to talk to him about William S. Burrough's *Naked Lunch*.

Spring 1994. (*We'll Drink Through It All, This The Modern Age*).

At Glenn's studio, the loud, all encompassing rock music becomes the

soundtrack. We continue a discussion about the nature of the questionable figures whose paintings Glenn paints. He has been quoted in a magazine as calling Frank Auerbach 'A second rate Van Gogh'. I know for a fact that he said this when he was drunk; it's too easy.

Winter 1993.

I have been reading the short stories of Guy de Maupassant again, and one in particular possesses me. In *The Horla*, an unfortunate is haunted by an invisible body whose malign spell takes over his mind, feeding on his life, trapping him in his home as a personal prey. The narrator writes:

I stood up, hand stretched out, and turned so fast that I almost fell. And so?... One could see as if in daylight, and I could not see myself in my mirror!...It was empty, clear, deep, full of light! My image was not in it... and I, I was facing it! I could see the limpid glass from top to bottom. And I looked at it with wild eyes; and I no longer dared to make a movement, sensing all the while that he was there, but that he would escape me again, he whose imperceptible body had devoured my reflection.

How I was afraid! So then all of a sudden I began to see myself in a fog, in the depth of the mirror, in a fog as if through a plane of water; and it seemed to me as if this water slid from left to right, slowly, making my image become more precise, second by second. It was like the end of an eclipse. What hid me, didn't seem possessed by any neatly defined contours but by a sort of opaque transparency, clearing itself, little by little."³

Winter 1994. (Atom Age Vampire).

Glenn is always there, often working all night, I have a key to his studio; and, on the way back to mine, call in on him. Whenever I walk in, his painting immediately calls me to the fascination of its surface. It compels me to pay attention to its 'look'. He paints this look, I look at it and try to define its abstraction. In the early hours I can understand the grip of Glenn's obsession. I drink some of his coffee, it is too strong. The look, the look, the look; the word itself becomes a barrier, it trips across my tongue as I walk home.

Spring 1995.

Glenn's studio is hot. We discuss his latest show. His new painting has gone to New York. Yesterday I felt that the painting had become a product which, even as I looked at it, seemed to slip away. Today I feel this absence as

oppressive, it is definitely there.

The absent surfaces of his paintings are present, they haunt me... The sun shines through the open windows of his studio, outside the traffic is light. The studio is almost empty. I flick through some of his books.

Undated Note. (*You Take My Place In This Showdown*).

I realise that, somehow, I am part of the work, part of its surface. Maybe this is why I feel threatened by this surface's disappearance. The general circularity of the figures, ideas and images reflected in the dark mirror of the painting includes me.

Winter 1993. (*Dead Relatives*).

I am in a bookshop on Charing Cross Road looking at a book with reproductions of Glenn's work in it. The familiar paintings appear as images. There is nothing there. For a moment I am afraid. I think about how the sign of the work is its surface. I realise that when this sign is itself reproduced, it vanishes... disappears. His painting hides as the surface of another painting; it is only visible as an idea. I feel his work is a science which puts us somewhere 'in' reproduction; the captured appearance of the face of his work, a capture enacted by the objective cliché of the photographic technology, suspends me within it as it becomes an idea. I feel cold. Claustrophobic. All of a sudden I remember Glenn's description of the end of the movie 'Superman' where the intergalactic villains are trapped within a two dimensional surface and sent spinning back into space. For some reason I feel better.

Autumn 1995.

I am reading all the time. '*Perceive everything, even Man as a thing.*' Giorgio de Chirico wrote this in 1913 and the monograph written on him which quotes it, goes on to explain that '*Thing*' was, for De Chirico: the '*Symbolising Factor*', the empty sign (the sign emptied of meaning) which could be used as a link in the construction of a new and prophetic chain of meaning... a language⁴. I tell Glenn that the thing of his work is its surface. He looks past me into space.

(*Telstar*).

Today was a day when I surrendered and enjoyed the painting's superficiality. It is for me an empty portent, something to be valued and celebrated. The surface look of it becomes for me the symbolising element

by which I can read it. Its fixed superficiality is a vehicle for my desire, a symbolic vehicle whose power is beginning to dawn on me. I feel we are dealing with the surfacing of symbols which are then articulated. A magic road.

Spring 1995. (*Mad Love*).

The painting is a state. The exercise of a rigor in the face of loss. A careful state of hallucination. Glenn has managed to offer access to a world within the skin of the static image itself. Its membrane repeatedly pulls me into its overpopulated liquid. The narcissism I happily drown in is collective. In the almost catastrophic sense of proliferating associations, a deluge of ideas and partial fantasies, I see my future reflected as the past, a reflection which is illuminated by obscure fugitive spirits; 'stars' casting glamorous nocturnal shadows.

Undated Note.

I look at Salvador Dali's *The Metamorphoses of Narcissus* at the Tate Gallery. The nature of Dali's 'Critical Paranoia' eludes me.

Summer 1996. (*Altered States*).

At a private view M. was discussing her project of putting together a picture of the 1960s from interviews. She wants to put together a portrait of a mass hallucination, the portrait of a kind of collective consciousness. T., a painter, told us of a few of his experiences, one of which involved drinking a bottle of whisky in an empty bedsit. As he collapsed he could see the window facing him flick alarmingly upwards like film frames, then, to his horror, he realised that he could see the sprocket holes on the edge of the film. The film jammed for what seemed to be an eternity, then jarred back into smooth motion again. He said he felt lucky to have survived.

Summer 1992. (*Let Me Take You By The Hand and Lead You Through The Streets Of London, I'll Show You Something To Make You Change Your Mind*).

The morbid animation of the painting invites an experience of frozen change. It is an Ice Age. The direct demands of the long titles which often sing the seductive ballads of popular sentiment, are siren songs of an absolute moment which would, indeed, change your mind. The paintings paint the body of an image... its look... as a frame between animation and the static, between a life and death.

(This duration is a semblance of the gaps between the frames of a projected film, abysses into which the mind falls for the mirage of movement,

where the innumerable, individual, static photos of the dead flicker into a simulacrum of life.)

Summer 1992. (*The Night of The Living Dead*).

I have this re-occurring nightmare that the painting has sucked me into a corpse. I have become involved in a dead idea. This dead body jerks spasmodically into motion between awful, frozen moments.

October 1993. (*Saturday Night Fever*).

Glenn comes over and we have an evening watching a series of videos. 'Terminator' and 'Terminator 2'⁵ followed by a Fischli and Weiss video⁶. The Swiss artists' film of a chain of collapsing events becomes one with the gripping and endless chase sequences of the Hollywood Movies action scenes. It's one thing after another. As I fall asleep watching the videos of these films, it strikes me that they are documents of the films' movements or smooth electronic records of filmic motion.

Winter 1993.

It is strange to see in his matter of fact paintings the '*shapes of divers monsters, beasts and men, which move like the clouds bitber and thither*'⁷. A whole slippery and lyrical way of looking is opened up, it's the face of Glenn's look.

Spring 1994.

He has an article written on him in The Guardian. Holding the newspaper in my hands, I notice something wrong about the photograph of him. After a while I realise from the reversed nature of the painting over his shoulder that they have printed the photograph the wrong way round. Everything is inverted. I ring to ask if this is what he looks like to himself in the mirror.

Undated Note.

Faced by the fortune which Glenn's science fiction represents, I am easily seduced into its fate; a dimension without gravity. The sterile, space station experience of the gallery is filled with an unexpectedly personal intimacy.

Summer 1995. (*This is The Last Song I Will Ever Sing, No I've Changed My Mind Again, Goodnight and Thank You*).

For Glenn's show at Karsten Schubert, he has painted the floor white and blocked the window. I feel guilty because I would have liked to have helped

him but I had to work elsewhere. The opening is strange. There is no smoking or drinking allowed. Glenn is tense, warily watching a small vulnerable sculpture he has put on the floor. It is a semblance of a Frank Auerbach portrait head, made in three dimensions. On the floor it looks like a menacing lump. It is lost amongst the feet of the crowd. I thought that he would show it on an oak 'plinth' like an executioners block. We had made a dark joke about it being 'well executed'. Now, the white floor itself has become its frame. There are some women here dressed in an early 1970s retro-futuristic look. The whole show feels to me like being in a fantasy sequence from '2001. A Space Odyssey'⁸.

(Within the operation of its theatre my eye draws me through to the other side of an empty promise. I am tripped into a silent free-fall through the critical dimension of an imagination. I have the sensation of the weightless descent.)

Glenn looks pale, trapped in the claustrophobic fluorescent light for too long. Someone goes and buys him a can of Tennants Super and sits him on the stairwell.

Summer 1996. *(Never Forever)*.

The idea of an image in flight is indicated, an idea whose present is always missing, always before and after, always dead and yet to come, a past endlessly waiting to pass, a future already gone. This cruel vision invites me to indicate the metamorphosis of an idea; a change of mind, a change of state. It is a fluid appearance in which painting becomes an uncanny science which holds an obsolete future within the duration of its patience. We are presented with the endless puzzle of an empty present, the horizon of its event. An event-horizon. A final frontier.

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¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'Windows' from Paris Spleen, trans. Louis Varese

² See Judith Barry. Carnegie International Catalogue. 1991

³ Guy de Maupassant, The Horla. trans. Phil King. (Livre De Poche Paris 1984)

⁴ See Giovanni Lista. De Chirico. p.75. (Art Data, England, 1991)

⁵ James Cameron. Terminator, Terminator 2. (Pacific Western, 1986, 1991)

⁶ Fischli and Weiss, Video. The Way Things Are

⁷ Raymond Lully. Compendium. Quoted in C.G.Jung 'Psychology and Alchemy'

⁸ Stanley Kubrick. 2001. A Space Odyssey. (Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, 1968)