



THIS IMAGE  
Reproduction,  
2014, oil on panel,  
135x101cm

# THE NEW MASTER

One of Britain's most celebrated artists, oil painter **GLENN BROWN** uses famous artworks as the basis for his own. **ROS ORMISTON** finds out why

## GLENN BROWN

**F**or his latest show, *Glenn Brown: Fantasy Landscapes, Portraits and Beasts* at Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, the artist has hung his own Old Masters-inspired paintings alongside work from the gallery's own historic collection, as part of the Great Exhibition of the North 2018. He reveals how and why curating the show this way illuminates his fascinating techniques.

**You have rehung artworks from the permanent collection, mixed with your own work. What do you want people to take away from that?**

Enjoyment, more than anything. I am not trying to be too academically rigorous. I've curated it in terms of subject mainly. I've tried to put artists from different centuries with different styles together. I'm trying to make a point. It doesn't matter how abstract or figurative, carefully painted or gestural a work is – you are getting a lot of the same emotions. Something is erotic, funny, dramatic or awe-inspiring. These things can be held in works that look entirely different.

**Why did you start appropriating the Old Masters?**

Initially, I wasn't so interested in it. When I started using other artists' work, it tended to be 20th-century artists, such as Frank Auerbach, Willem de Kooning, Karel Appel, Asger Jorn and Henry Moore.

**What made you choose those artists?**

I was interested in the brushstroke; the idea of originality. That each artist had a handwriting held within their brushstroke. I was making almost photorealist copies of parts of their paintings, copying their brushstrokes in a flat, meticulous way.

**Who are your favourite artists?**

At the moment I am interested in northern European Baroque art. People are aware of Italian Baroque, but I think a lot of the artists of Germany and Holland were doing equally good and strange work. So, you have Albrecht Dürer, Hendrik Goltzius, Abraham Bloemaert and Bartholomeus Spranger: all artists who, I think, drew the human body beautifully well, distorting the human form to dramatic effect. And their depictions of landscapes are very accentuated. They are not depicting nature, they are depicting their interpretation of what nature could look like.

**Has that influenced your work?**

I like the idea of the distortion of reality. I am not trying to depict what you see. I am trying to create an artificial world to accentuate the idea that we all see the world differently.

**What is your painting process?**

If I see a painting, I will transfer it onto the computer and play around with it, turning it back to front, stretching it, often taking out all the colour to look at it in black and white to concentrate on composition. I often distort things, sometimes layer different images, then start drawing on top of it on the computer. When I'm happy with it I make a sketch on the computer. That's the starting point. It gives me an idea of how the painting is going to look in the end.

**You grew up in Hexham, Northumberland. What was your first introduction to art?**

Probably the first museum I ever went into was the Laing. I wouldn't have gone in many times because my parents were more interested in literature than painting or sculpture. So, it was probably in my late teens that I started to look at painting. I had quite a late introduction to it compared to most people.

**When did you know you were going to be an artist?**

In the 1980s when I left school and was trying to decide what form of education to go on to, I didn't really know there was such a thing as being a professional artist. In fact, when I went to do my foundation course I didn't realise you were supposed to do a degree afterwards. I was quite naive. But, for a long time I had been going to life-drawing classes at Norwich School of Art. I lived near Norwich at the time. They had very good life-drawing classes, so since about the age of 13 or 14 I was going to those. And I loved them. And I loved the art college, even the smell of it. The whole notion of the art college I just thought was fantastic.

**What are you working on now?**

I'm working on a mural painting that will go around three walls. It's the largest work I've ever done. It's going to be for a space in Marylebone, London, and it's based on Abraham Bloemaert's drawings of trees. Hopefully, when you walk in, you will feel you are surrounded by this woodland scene, with these very abstract gnarled and grotesque trees surrounding you.

**Which of your artworks pleases you most?**

That's a difficult one. I like the process of painting more than I do looking at my own paintings. So, whenever I see a painting of mine I want to keep changing it, even if it is hanging in the gallery or museum. I still sometimes take a brush and start changing parts because I can always improve them. One of the wonderful things about hanging your work next to other artists is that it shows how much better your work could be. If I look at the brushstrokes on the John Martin paintings [on display in the Laing Art Gallery exhibition], there is an amazing sharpness; I would want to add sharper marks to my paintings, so I want to keep reacting to the works surrounding it. I like borrowing techniques from other artists. So, which of my work pleases me most? Well, I always find problems in all of my paintings. I find all of them a little bit displeasing to look at. I want to keep resolving all of the problems.

**Do you ever have a painting that doesn't work?**

Yes. Sometimes it takes me a very long time to finish a piece of work because I don't know how to resolve it. I've had paintings in my studio that have been there for five or six years. But there are some that don't work at all, so I spoil them. But, with most paintings, you can paint over whole areas that you are not happy with. Lots of drawings fail, but not too many paintings.

*Glenn Brown: Fantasy Landscapes, Portraits and Beasts* is at Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, until 21 October. [www.laingartgallery.org.uk](http://www.laingartgallery.org.uk); [www.glenn-brown.co.uk](http://www.glenn-brown.co.uk)

CLOCKWISE

FROM TOP LEFT  
*Anaesthesia*,  
2001, oil on panel  
105.5x83cm;  
the artist's latest  
exhibition at Laing  
Art Gallery; *On the  
Way to the Leisure  
Centre*, 2017, oil on  
panel, 122x244cm



“I am not trying to depict what you see. I am trying to accentuate the idea that we all see differently.”

