

Frankenstein's pick-and-mix

NICK HACKWORTH | EVENING STANDARD | Tuesday 14 September 2004 00:00 |



Click to follow
The Evening Standard



Glenn Brown is best known to the public for being accused of theft. In 2000, the painter, now 38, was nominated for the Turner Prize and in the Tate exhibition that year displayed *The Loves of the Shepherds*, an enlarged and slightly altered version of a work by science-fiction artist Tony Roberts.

Roberts accused Brown of copyright infringement and the matter was settled privately out of court.

The case was the result of an unfortunate clash of cultures. As is evident in Brown's first British retrospective, his work has always been explicitly founded on the appropriation of images and styles from other artists, living and dead, from Rembrandt to Fragonard, and from Auerbach to more demotic practitioners such as Tony Roberts.

Indeed, he describes himself as a "Dr Frankenstein, constructing paintings out of the dead parts of other artists' work". Over the decade since he graduated from Goldsmiths College, Brown's morbid activities have produced a body of accomplished and compellingly odd-looking works, 40 or so of which are on show here.

Until the word "Postmodern" began to fall out of fashion, Brown's pick-and-mix raiding of art history would have been described as exactly that, and regarded as a comment on the impossibility of originality in this age.

Anaesthesia, for example, takes two dogs from a Landseer painting and colours them with a sickly green taken from a work by Belgian painter Luc Tuymans. Joseph Beuys, meanwhile, is not a portrait of the celebrated German artist-cum-mystic but a visual riff on Rembrandt's Boy in Fanciful Costume.

Brown further subverts the high seriousness of the art he references by giving his pieces ironic names, often culled from pop music, such as Death Disco, taken from a Public Image Limited song.

His painting style, too, has the same blend of respect and irreverence, amounting to painstakingly sustained trompe l'oeil, for, though utterly flat, his meticulous surfaces deliberately give the illusion of being made with thick lashings of paint, a trick put to best effect in his multiple takes on Auerbach paintings.

It is clear from the exhibition that Brown's main motivation is a love of paint and painting, rather than the making of theoretical statements.

This love, combined with the frustrations of working in his anally retentive style, no doubt caused him to let rip and make lumpy sculptures from dollops and smears of oil paint, a handful of which are on show.

On the whole, however, the show is a high-art equivalent of the surreal mangling of images, historical styles and ideas seen in advertising and the mass media. An enjoyable, quickly consumed and bewildering parade of jumbled signs, many of them appropriately coloured in toxic hues.

Until 7 November. Information: 020 7298 1514. ■