

**Glenn Brown/Rebecca Warren: Collected Works  
The Rennie Collection at Wing Sang, Vancouver**

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*By Rhys Edwards*

The myth of the Medusa has endured for hundreds of years because it appeals to a pre-conscious fear: the fear of being trapped in a singular physical form and denied one's freedom. That this fear still retains its subliminal currency was illustrated by the Rennie Collection's winter exhibit, *Glenn Brown/Rebecca Warren: Collected Works*. Though they are both Goldsmiths graduates and Turner Prize nominees, the initial motive for combining Warren and Brown's work in a single space seemed obtuse, since their working methods are so divergent; Warren shapes precariously anthropomorphic figures out of unfired clay, often combining them with light materials such as pom-poms and fabric, while Brown appropriates the works of other painters and reworks them in oils using a slick, highly lucid technique. Upon closer examination, however, their relationship is obvious: both artists exploit a preternatural fear of physical form.

Brown renders the subjects of his paintings illusionistically; yet, by realizing them in a grossly distorted form, he conceals them and alienates their relationship with the figurative aspirations of the painting itself. In *17 Seconds* (2009), for instance, a grotesque concatenation of vividly realized colour strings, distantly reminiscent of the Medusa's own serpent-strewn visage, collapses into a singularity — a black monolithic void not unlike the eye of the Medusa's mythological cousin, the Cyclops — all the while playing out against the pictorial backdrop of a star-strewn sky. Using very thin glazes with a matte medium, Brown denies the hundreds of flat, non-figurative brushstrokes that constitute the sickly veneer of his imagery their own physical agency. In this way, they become empty mockeries of the high-relief surfaces popularized by abstract expressionism — but the lack of particularized subject matter simultaneously subverts the will to illusionism latent with the history of Western painting.

Warren's work is an inversion of the same dynamic. Her method takes the representation of women within art as its source material, and references Edgar Degas' aspirations toward the emancipation of the sculpted figure, as well as cartoonist R. Crumb's hyper-exaggeration of female sexuality. Taking her cue from both sources, as well as post-minimalist artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Warren makes the sculpted figure into a polymorphous organism. In works such as *Fido* (2006), breasts and buttocks emerge out of an interminably undifferentiated, dancing body. The fragility of the unbaked clay from which her figures are composed, as well as their frequent lack of protective casing or support structures, underlies an ephemeral will towards form — the figures are not unlike the victims of the Medusa, attempting to escape her gaze. Moreover, Warren's sculptures satirize the feminine figure; yet, in aping the strictures of gallery exhibition protocol, as well as the industrialized production methods of a predominantly object-oriented contemporary art industry, they display an anti-instrumentalized, feminist agency.

In essence, Brown's work is permanent, all too permanent, to the point that it makes the grotesque truly unbearable. Conversely, Warren denatures the grotesque by imbuing it with a fleeting will toward determinate being, a striving toward grace — an idealized feminine grace that, nevertheless, Warren denies to it.

However, though each artist stands commonly upon a solid (or rather, nervously miscible) material practice, the Rennie collection did not itself deign to explore this valency in any curatorial sense, which is regrettable; Brown and Warren's work was primly divided into different galleries. The strongest element of the exhibition was found in two specific pieces that transgressed the

otherwise consistent throughout of each artist, and in that transgression found an explicit bond; yet, the Rennie neglected to explore this bond in any meaningful way. Brown's *The Sound of Music* (1997), an agglomeration of oil paint pasted over a plaster framework, was the only sculptural work of his in the exhibition — in a brilliant twist, the same materiality which is suppressed in his two-dimensional paintings is transplanted into three-dimensional space, and in the transition remediated into the same organic abstraction to which Warren aspires. The orientation toward the figure that Warren demonstrates in her own work, meanwhile, was ruptured with *Cube* (2006), an MDF cube coated entirely in uncast bronze — here, much in the same way that Brown distorts and reframes the corporeality of popular and historical aesthetic genres, Warren punctures the sterile logic of high modernism with the grandeur and insouciance of the Baroque.

Yet, the works themselves were culled indiscriminately from each artist's respective corpus — all of Warren's pieces were drawn from her 2006 exhibition at the Tate Triennial, while Brown's were simply items that Vancouver real estate mogul Bob Rennie had purchased for his personal collection. Though the interconnection between the works was tacitly detectable, then, the straightforwardly museological underpinnings of the exhibit reflected a broader problem with the Rennie Collection's ostensible *modus operandi*. A relatively young institution — it only opened in 2009 — the Rennie's mandate is to expose Vancouver audiences to socially significant works from globally renowned artists; however, shows like *Glenn Brown/Rebecca Warren* undermine the efficacy of such exposition, since the disinterested presentation of the work in the space comes off as merely laudatory. As a visitor, one is not so much intrigued by the artwork's defiance of form as merely reminded that one has been blessed to receive communion with it at all.

There is a more digressive sense, then, in which the Medusa was resurrected at the Rennie: being separated from each other, Brown and Warren's artwork became *cadavre exquis* — the petrified trophies of commodified taste.

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