

A conversation between Glenn Brown and Mardee Goff, one of the curators of 'Portrait of the Artist As...' recorded at Brown's studio in East London on 7 June 2012. The artist generally prefers written interviews but graciously agreed to this informal conversation in which he discusses his work 'Decline and Fall'. What emerges is a representation of the artist's personality in keeping with the spirit of the exhibition.

MG: When looking at an early work like [Decline and Fall](#), how has it changed over time for you? Does it seem different from your work now?

GB: The sensation I often get when looking at earlier work is that I don't think that I could paint like that now. I think the way I paint is quite different now. The paintings then were much smaller and tighter. Now they tend to be bigger and slightly looser. There is an intensity in earlier work that I don't think I could reproduce. Well I could, but I don't think I would want to, and certainly *Decline and Fall* fits into this category.

MG: As you say this canvas is smaller than many of your works now. Was this to do at all with the studio you were working in at the time? Or was it just what you chose to take on?

GB: As far as I remember the size of the canvas is the size of the original Auerbach canvas, even though my painting has been quite heavily cropped. So you don't actually see all the painting, and in some senses the brush strokes have been enlarged. But I think that is what guided me to that size, although a lot of my paintings at that time were smaller. Not because I had a small studio, but I think that in the 1980s-1990s a lot of the paintings coming out were very big and I very purposefully wanted to be antagonistic towards that fashion of large-scale paintings.

MG: Do you remember the specific Auerbach painting this work was based on?

GB: I can't remember the specific painting off the top of my head, but paintings I was doing at the time were fairly direct renditions of the original paintings. I wasn't changing

the work that much then. I think soon after that the paintings started to change much more.

MG: Did you ever see any of the original Auerbach paintings that you used in your work?

GB: Sometimes, but it wasn't really the important thing. It was more important that I like the reproduction I was working from and sometimes I would see the paintings in the flesh and then wouldn't like the reproductions and wouldn't want to work from them.

MG: Would you say you have at least seen an original version of every artist who you are basing your works on?

GB: Yes, and it is quite important. I will spend ages in front of an original and study the way the brush marks are made. It's always one of the most exciting things when looking at the painting to try and animate the way the artist made them and the way their hand was moving whilst doing it.

MG: You have often returned to Auerbach's work as a subject of your own and have copied quite a few of his portraits. Do you think the process of emulating Auerbach's technique over and over again like this has influenced the way your work and your personal style has developed?

GB: Yes, I think Auerbach was an influence. I made quite a number of works, I think about 20 after Auerbach, which is more than any other artist, still. Even though I haven't made one after him for a long time. I think the last one was maybe fifteen years ago.

There's a nice economy to his painting, which I think I've taken on board. He likes to reduce the colours and brush strokes that he uses. It's especially influenced the sculptures that I make, so that even if the colour and subject matter don't reference him, the relatively uniform size of the brush stroke does.

MG: I know in some of your past interviews your personal relationship with Auerbach has been brought up. Its been mentioned that you've met him in passing, he's aware of your work, but that you don't have any personal relationship with him. It's more through his paintings that you have a relationship with him. Is this still true?

GB: Yes.

MG: It is really interesting how different your practice is from Frank Auerbach's. Particularly in the way his association to the 'School of London' and this tight circle of figurative artists, such as Lucian Freud, has affected his artistic practice. As well as actually sitting for one another's work they seemed to endeavor a moral and intellectual collaboration that informed each other's work to a large extent. This doesn't really seem to exist in your generation of artists in England, would you say?

GB: Well I don't sit for the artists because the artists I know don't make work like this anymore. I do think my experience at Goldsmiths was one of the most important experiences in terms of pushing me in the direction that my work is in. It was a very discussion-based course for me. It was very much about the peers that you have in the course and about what you give to each other. Working out that relationship with other artists is very important, and it's still very important that I have other artists in my studio. We sit and make decisions about paintings, whether it's my paintings or their paintings in a discussion. So very often it's not just me presenting a painting, there are other people behind it as well, giving advice and we've made decisions together. That very much comes from my practice at Goldsmiths, in order to make an eloquent piece of art you had to know what the audience might be thinking about and the best way to know was to ask the audience. The easiest audiences were other artists.

MG: I think both your work and [Auerbach's](#) adds a very interesting element to the exhibition in the fact that you both point out the challenges of actually creating a self-

portrait. Auerbach rarely depicted himself, saying capturing his own image was like, ‘chasing one’s own shadow.’ And likewise you have never done a self-portrait?

GB: No. I’ve also since about 2000 tried not to let anyone take photographs of me. I am interested in people not knowing what I look like. I’m not in control of the photographs of me before 2000, but most people have stopped using them. Sometimes in books and catalogs they want images, so I’ve put a painting of mine, usually a painting called [Sex](#), as a stand-in self-portrait of myself. I like the idea of being anonymous and of people not knowing what I look like. In representing myself I could be different. Really, suggesting that a lot of the paintings that I make are self-portraits. There’s been a quite a number of paintings I’ve done recently of old men with beards, two of them are in the room here, and I think that’s sort of an idea representing the self. I’m projecting myself into older age, and—apart from the fact beards are really interesting to paint because the brush marks can take over the face—they offer an opportunity to make some sort of self-portrait, even though it’s obviously not a direct self-portrait.

MG: You said you don’t always use this image *Sex* as yourself but do switch between images?

GB: I mostly use that one piece. It’s a bit of a comic rendition of myself because of the red nose and blue face.

MG: It does look like you...

GB: Well the collector that owns it always refers to it as a self-portrait. I’ve used other paintings as well for stand-ins.

MG: In terms of other artists in England, around your generation, it seems common for artists to use their image as a representation of their art. As their medium in a sense, creating an icon out of their image and really creating a celebrity out the artist in a lot of ways.

GB: Right, like Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, Gavin Turk...

MG: ...Marc Quinn, Gilbert and George, so it is interesting that your work really is the opposite. Would you consider it a commentary to that?

GB: Very much so because as I realised that was becoming the fashionable thing to do. I again wanted to do the opposite of it. Maybe it's within my nature, within my education to always think of what the opposite view might be and very often to take that view just for the purpose of intellectual challenge—to see whether you can get away with it or not. So yes, it was very much that I didn't want to be a celebrity artist.

MG: As we have discussed, your work in many ways challenges the conventions of self-portraiture. You have even said that all of your works are self-portraits. Do you think that if an artist claims their work is a self-portrait, even if it doesn't look like one, then to some degree it must be?

GB: That's the vane of conceptual art very often, you can make claims for things and see whether people are willing to go the distance believing you or not. So that's why I've put certain paintings forward as self-portraits, and will continue to do it, because the context of a painting is very important. If you say it's a self-portrait, even if the title doesn't refer to it as being a self-portrait, the context as saying certain paintings have been produced as self-portraits turns them into self-portraits, it's up to certain people whether they believe that or not. It is certainly my intention that they should at least play with the idea.

MG: Continuing from that point, when we were considering *Decline and Fall* for this exhibition we spent a lot of time discussing whether or not it directly addressed our exhibition's theme—images of artists. After all, the original Auerbach portrait you copied depicts not an artist but a model. We discussed whether it might be a self-portrait, for the reasons we have spoken about, or whether it could even be considered a portrait of Frank Auerbach?

GB: Personally with *Decline and Fall* I don't really see it as a painting of myself or a painting of Auerbach directly. What interested me was that Auerbach sat in the studio painting the model, and, like Picasso fundamentally, Auerbach is more interested in what his opinion is of the model rather than what the model actually looks like. In quite a lot of his paintings, the model is fairly interchangeable and not recognisable. The way in which he paints, the way he leaves the brush on canvas, they are sort of portraits of him—and that's what I'm trying to capture, more than who sat in the chair being painted.

MG: He becomes the subject of the painting.

GB: Yes, for instance, in Matisse portraits, the subjects often don't have eyes. And the same with Picasso, the eyes often just turned into an empty hollow black. He literally has taken the character, the individuality from the sitter and so you are very aware that you're looking at Picasso rather than the person he was painting.

And the same with Auerbach, there are no eyes in Auerbach. The model can't look back at you. You can't engage with the model or tell what the model was thinking when looking at any of Auerbach's paintings. It's not about what the model was thinking. It's completely about what Matisse, Picasso, and Auerbach were thinking, and that's what interests me. And that's why, at least I think that's why, I paint Auerbach more than I do the actual model. So you're right. It is a portrait of Auerbach in some senses.

MG: I know many of your titles do not often make direct connections with the subjects in the works, but I am curious with regards to the source of this title? I have a strong idea of where it came from but I am wondering if there is more of a connection between the title and work than you might normally have?

GB: Well, it refers to Gibbons's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*¹. In this context, I just like the idea of the decline and fall of the human being. Also, a lot of paintings are debased or reduced in some way, in the sense that they are second versions of something that previously existed and in that sense a declining version of reality. It also relates, I suppose, to the 1990s when the painting was made, and the idea of death of painting that was very much talked about. I think many critics and even artists thought that painting was coming to an end, that it had nowhere to go. And so there was this sense that this marked the end of painting, the death of painting, the decline of it from its great heights where it dominated the art world for the last 500 years to actually probably not dominating anything, not dominating art anymore.

When choosing a title I do not like it to be too narrative, not to be too precise. They need to have a sort of a poetic resonance with the actual painting so any singular meaning isn't too obvious. So it's actually more complex than something that is simply descriptive. Maybe on different days or with different knowledge you'll get different reading of the title.

MG: Would you say, in some sense, you are using this element of chance afforded by personal interpretations of the title as a way to have the work resonate with the viewer?

GB: Yes, because there is very little chance in the painting. There's sort of the process in which I made the paintings. It takes a very long time and there is nothing really left to chance within it. I don't let the paint flow of its own accord, it's all very controlled, therefore with the title, I suppose I like the viewer's imagination left to chance to some degree.

MG: As you are aware, the exhibition includes Van Gogh's [*Self Portrait with a Bandaged Ear*](#) (1889). It would be interesting to hear in what ways Van Gogh has been an inspiration for you? Is your use of colour and your brushwork influenced by him?

¹ *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is a book by Edward Gibbons. Published in 1776, the influential work, divided into six volumes, covers the history of the Roman Empire, Europe, and the Catholic Church from 98 to 1590 and discusses the decline of the Roman Empire in the East and West.

GB: I have done paintings based on Van Gogh but more often I have taken the color from particular Van Gogh paintings and superimposed them on other paintings by other artists. I also will take one brush mark from one painting and put them in other paintings. So yes, he has a lot of paintings that are almost extended pointillism where he uses big brush marks of quite similar size and I sometimes do that in my sculpture as well. As well as in the paintings I will have a repeated brush strokes of relatively similar size.

MG: Yes, which is very controlled. But when you do take these colours do you think that the emotion in the original work is lost? Or do you think it is still translated in your paintings?

GB: I hope it does, that's my idea.

MG: Many of the works in this exhibition present an element of the sacrifice required in being an artist. Van Gogh's bandaged ear is perhaps the most obvious emblem of this idea of artist sacrifice. However, this notion is also present in the shadow in Francis Bacon's [*Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh VI*](#) (1957) where we get the sense that there is a heavy burden to being an artist. Do you find that there is any haunting aspect to your own creativity?

GB: I am very aware with each painting that when people look at them they understand the amount of time the painting has taken to make and that I have been personally with the painting for a long time; that I have in some sense chained myself to that painting and spent hours, many hours, days and months looking at it, in front of it and labouring over it. So I think I want that sensibility that I have given up large parts of my life in order to devote myself to the cause of painting. And partially that's why I put so much labour into the making of the painting. It is almost a religious dedication to a cause and just to make a painting in 20 minutes or a day wouldn't seem enough of a penance for me to pay. You have to struggle at a painting more than that. So even a painting like *Decline and Fall* took many weeks to paint and I spent hours and hours, sometimes 12-14 hours a day,

painting it. So it is this sort of, yes, almost religious zeal in my idea of dedicating myself towards painting.

MG: I guess to wrap things up I might just ask you a question that ties back to a broader notion underlying our exhibition. A number of the portraits on display portray artists as a certain outcast, a genius, or a tortured soul. Do you think you identify with these types of artist-figures, or do you try to distance yourself from them?

GB: I'd have to ask you if you mean me as a person? Or my work? Or my paintings in general? Or this particular painting, *Decline and Fall*?

MG: So you might say that you as a person are different to you as an artist?

GB: Oh yeah, I think as an artist you act. You invent a character for a particular painting and then paint the painting as if you are that character. You may want a degenerate feel to one particular painting or want an overly happy sensation in another painting. So you totally change characteristics, to a certain degree. There are certain things you realise you are more interested in than others. There is probably a certain miserable feeling to a lot of my paintings basically because I find that more engaging. So if people want to read a certain characteristic of me as an individual, it probably is of a sort of miserable, isolated artist stuck in the studio.