

# Glenn Brown's time capsule with a twist

**At home with the FT** | The artist's relish for history and dark playfulness in his work has been channelled into a restoration that tells a story in every corner. By Victoria Woodcock. Photographs by Alex Kurunis

**T**here are moments in the Marylebone home of artist Glenn Brown when a costume seems called for. The painter, who rose to prominence in the 1990s alongside the so-called Young British Artists, lives in a Georgian town house of period-drama proportions. While a great sack-back gown wouldn't go amiss, Brown himself, in his skinny-fit suit and statement mustache, appears somehow tethered to a bygone era.

He bought the property in 2018 with his husband, Edgar Lagunina. It was a project. What from the outside was an elegant six-storey home was, on the inside, a series of inelegantly partitioned spaces. Over the years they had served as offices and doctors' surgeries, with a shaft wedged into the central staircase.

But when it came to making decisions about the three-year overhaul, it was neither Brown nor Lagunina that led the way. "The house did," says Brown, friendly and matter-of-fact. "It told us what to do."

The result is a faithful restoration of late 18th-century grandeur. In some places, layers of paint have been scraped back to uncover and then recreate the original. Mouldings have been painted with a faux wood-grain effect, to resemble mahogany and satinwood — as was the vogue then. Plug sockets are now hidden in the floor and light switches are as invisible as possible.

When the house itself hasn't provided clues as to how it looked 200 years ago, the team turned to National Trust or other Georgian properties for reference. The blue paint on the banister, for example, was inspired by Somerset House, while the staircase itself was based on the one at the Sir John Soane's Museum. "Our architect [Emma Whitworth at Whitworth Howell] got told off for measuring it," says Brown.

In the dining room, a Georgian mural lurked underneath multiple applications of wallpaper. "It's probably Italian, with dragons and plants and grotesques, but it had been too badly damaged to restore," says Brown. "We couldn't possibly paint over it, though, because I've got too much respect for it." Instead they opted for a curtain.

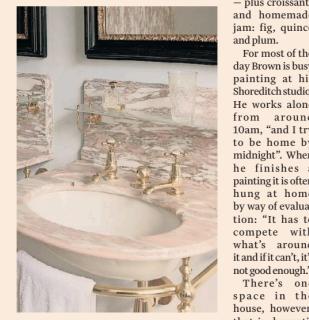
Historical reverence is at the heart of Brown's artistic practice. His paintings always feature a reference to existing artwork. It could be a 16th-century engraving by Dutch master Hendrick Goltzius; a painting by 18th-century Venetian Giovanni Battista Tiepolo; or an early 20th-century drawing by English artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare. They are then menacingly transformed with lurid colours and sinewy brushstrokes. Sleek and hair often seem earthly.

With his paintings, I want people to think that they're changing from one thing to another, that everything is moving," explains Brown, whose work has been the subject of multiple solo shows with Gagosian gallery (most recently at Frieze Masters), as well as at institutions such as Amsterdam's Rembrandt House and the British Museum. Since 2022, he and Lagunina have also run their own London museum, The Brown Collection, nearby in Marylebone, bringing together Brown's works and those by other artists. It also runs events — from life-drawing classes to a programme of artist talks.

"The collection is mostly historic — a lot of 17th and 18th-century paintings, prints and drawings — but there are contemporary artists that we love too," he says. *Hoi Polloi*, the current exhibition, is a smartly curated ode to "people", from Dutch mannerism up



Clockwise from left: Glenn Brown at his London town house; Brown's painting 'The Laughing Stock of the Heartless Stars' (2024-25) in the curtain-walled dining room; the hallway is densely hung with empty picture frames; Chatsworth Chinoiserie wallpaper by De Gournay in the first-floor living room



Clockwise from above: the mid-century loft, with a Paul Kingma table and Brown's 'Amon Carter' (Museum (Philip Johnson)', 1988; a painting of a Georgian bed; 'Pitti', 1996, by Hendrick Goltzius; an Edwardian sink; painting attributed to Giovanni Battista Piazzetta

to Brown and his contemporaries Anya Gallaccio and Gillian Wearing. "You can tell stories by putting works together," says Brown. "That's what we do in the collection."

It's also what he and Lagunina, a former product designer who now directs The Brown Collection, do at home, where "the painting spreads into the room and becomes part of the painting". In the first-floor living room, for example, the birds in De Gournay's rambling Chinoiserie wallpaper are in conversation with a vast abstract canvas by contemporary artist Fiona Rae. On top of the curtain-clad dining-room walls, there are paintings by British post-impressionist Walter Sickert and surrealist Grace Pailthorpe. "She was a surgeon, then a psychoanalyst; she was

a genius," says Brown. "All her work is a stream of consciousness."

As we walk through the home, each artwork elicits a passionate appraisal. In the study, a tiny and fantastically detailed Hendrick Goltzius engraving is

"It's Dulux; it just has a number. It's not called dead salmon — or live salmon — or anything like that."

one of the masterpieces of mankind," says Brown. The room's pink paint colour, meanwhile, was recently recreated for Brown's show at the Freud Museum. "It's Dulux; it just has a number," he says

of the shade. "It's not called dead salmon or live salmon — or anything like that."

"Glenn has an instinct for colours," adds Lagunina. "And he is a friend on the internet. He paints, then he looks at auction sites."

Nearly all the furniture is antique — from the Georgian chandeliers to the four-poster beds. The same Georgian sense of style belongs to American philanthropist Diane Heiss ("as in baked beans"), a mirror in the downstairs loo came from a sale of Peter Stringfellow's effects. "We like old toilets and fixtures," laughs Lagunina, highlighting one of their sources: Mongers Architectural Salvage in Hinckley, Northamptonshire, where Brown grew up.

The couple met through friends more than 20 years ago. A typical day begins

with breakfast together; sometimes in the basement kitchen, a space where "you're supposed to imagine that you're in the 1790s", says Lagunina. They've maintained the original fireplace — "that was the Gaggenau of the time," says Brown — while the electric hob can be removed from the workshop to preserve the period feel. "We both like cooking," says Lagunina. "He does the healthy stuff, I do the healthy stuff."

The couple moved into the top floor of the house, a surprising 1960s restyle by the previous owner, architect John Harris, best known as the creator of the first city master plan for Dubai in 1960, and also responsible for the glass-walled, terracotta-tiled corridor running the length of the courtyard garden downstairs.

The loft space is "like a time capsule", says Lagunina. "At night it's a cocktail lounge." They've leaned into the retro vibe, with mid-century furnishings. Coffee and cocktail tables, cast in concrete with stones and metal pieces, are by Dutch designer Paul Kingma, set, on my visit, with 1960s Gio Ponti tableware

— plus croissants and homemade jam: fig, quince and plum.

For most of the day Brown is busy painting at his Shoreham studio. He works alone from around 10am, "and I try to be home by midnight". When he finishes a painting it is often hung at home by way of evaluation: "It has to connect with what's around it and if it can't, it's not good enough."

There's one space in the house, however, that is dramatically devoid of artwork: the hallway, which is instead densely hung with empty picture frames. "It's a slightly different space to put a painting in, because it's a place of passing through, but it was a good place to put frames," says Brown, whose collection spans a 17th-century Florentine beehive made for the Medici family to a Georgian design by British architect William Kent.

As well as their London base, the couple own a manor house in Suffolk dating back to 1679, which is their first foray into historic renovation. "It's ours," says Lagunina, "but we're doing it along the lines of builder James Whitworth, who they worked with on both their London home and The Brown Collection. But they will not, asserts Brown, be taking on another fixer-upper. When the chance arose last year to take on "something twice as big, Glenn didn't even want to see it", says Lagunina. "I couldn't let it go, though, so I recommended it to some friends — and they bought it."

A smaller project, however, is in the works: a demised ceiling shell grotto on the grounds of their Suffolk home. While Lagunina is currently making porcelain animals to add to the shell-enclosed walls, Brown is working on three paintings for the space, which will also be shown at Number One Royal Crescent in Bath as part of a multi-venue exhibition opening on May 22. The motivation behind this folly is simple, says Lagunina: "That's what people did in the 1700s, so that's what we did."

*'Hoi Polloi'* at The Brown Collection till August 8, 2026; the-brown-collection.co.uk



Scan me to At home with the FT features, with everyone from ambassadors to artists