

The spooky new age of weirdness

The spirit of Hieronymus Bosch is summoned up in a witches' coven of a show exploring magic and spirituality

Waldemar Januszczak



When it comes to directions, art is a writhing snake. None of us can confidently predict where it will head next. But when the Eighties turned into the Nineties, and the Nineties became the Noughties, and even when the Noughties grew into the Teenies, none of us expected the art of the 2020s to develop such a powerful taste for magic, hocus-pocus, the irrational, the senseless. Everywhere you turn in art today, reason is being booted out by unreason.

The event now on at the Brown Collection is titled **Hoi Polloi**. And according to the exhibition paperwork its focus is: "the many", "the great unwashed", you and me. "Hoi polloi" is ancient Greek for "the people". We have been a recurring subject in art. And this show, the leaflet says, is a selection of the results.

Except that it isn't. It really isn't. Instead, it's a batty survey of weird and spooky sights, some of which feature figures and faces, but never straightforwardly or prosaically. Artist after artist at this witches' coven goes off on some wacky tangent as they set about fleeing collectively from reason and exploring the floaty kingdoms of magic and spirituality. In the end there is a glue holding them together, and we'll come to it, but it's certainly not "the people".

The Brown Collection is one of London's most unexpected

galleries. It's located in a posh bit of Marylebone, down a dinky mews, and its owner, Glenn Brown, is a painter, not a dealer. He too is a shadowy presence. In February he turns 60, yet people still think of him as a YBA. His pictures cost millions (his auction record is \$8.12 million) but he's rarely a name on anyone's lips, and you never see his art at biennales or mixed shows. As soon as it is painted, wealthy Americans gobble it up and it disappears from public view. Unless he saves it for himself and puts it in his museum.

Hoi Polloi is a mix of his own work with art from his personal collection. He's a passionate haunter of auctions, with a taste for esoteric talents and unheralded names. Such as Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956), a dazzling draftsman who spent his entire career in the 20th century, but whose tastes were grounded firmly in the ancient and the mystical.

Spare was a follower of the creepy satanist Aleister Crowley. Until recently no one took him seriously. But in this show he's one of the stars. *The Dwellers at the Gates of Silent Memory* is something Hieronymus Bosch might have produced if he chewed peyote: a writhing ectoplasmic fantasy involving spectral nudes and a disturbing zoo of owls, eagles and lions.

Brown is particularly keen on forgotten women artists, most of whom appear to be listening intently to the whisperings of their id. Gertrude Hermes (1901-83) gives us edgy close-ups of poisonous plants. Ann



Churchill produces twitchy daily drawings that seem to have poured out of her unconscious with no hint of direction or shape, as if some powerful outer force were directing her in a seance.

I'm certain *Hoi Polloi* did not set out to prove that women artists are keener on unreason than the membered gender, but on this evidence you could be forgiven for thinking so. That said, Brown has taken up the best positions in the show and given himself the most space. And when it comes to the

pursuit of unreason, he, too, is a dab hand.

A lofty painting called *The Holy Bible* features the trunk of an ancient tree whose roots have twisted anthropomorphically into a floppy penis. In art, gnarled and twisty trees have stood in regularly for the human condition. What this has to do with the Bible remains stubbornly unclear.

When *the Satellite Sings* shows a naked hero in a Michelangelo pose staring out into a blue galactic distance. Imagine Rodin's *Thinker* lifting

“Artist after artist goes off on some wacky tangent



Wicked witchcraft When the *Satellite Sings* by Glenn Brown. Above: *The Dwellers at the Gates of Silent Memory* by Austin Osman Spare

his head and noticing for the first time that there's a big night sky out there. What's missing is singing, satellites and a tangible reason for the Michelangeloesque figure to be sitting in the sky naked.

Brown's imagery seems always to favour the far-away world of the old masters: their symbolism, their subjects, the limits of their knowledge. In making his pictures, he uses digital aids and computer reproductions, but the finished works appear to prefer the old methods. Which is where, finally, we get to that real glue holding everything here together: the difficult bit.

The works from Brown's collection that surround his own paintings come from a rich variety of sources. They range from examples by great masters (Tiepolo, Goltzius, Piazzetta) to the recently dead (Anna Zinkeisen, Annie

French, Gertrude Hermes). They are fiendishly different. But they do share an obvious interest in mark-making: the essence of art, how to describe a three-dimensional world with two-dimensional signs.

It's a challenge Brown foregrounds in his paintings by borrowing his marks directly from old master details and Renaissance engravings. The busy clusters of lines with which his shapes are shaped are transported from the mythological fantasies of Jan Harmensz Muller and the prints of Aegidius Sadeler.

Because the job of an engraving is to simplify further the reductions needed to create a painting, using them as a model takes us to a particularly significant level of art. Thus a show that pretends to be about "the people", and seems initially to be about the war against reason, turns out finally to be a celebration of the language that art has to employ to create its illusions.

Hoi Polloi is at the Brown Collection, London, to Aug 8

My Cultural Firsts

Amanda Owen

The TV shepherd, 51, on meeting Richard Gere and her unlikely rebellion.

By Ahula Hart

First book I loved

My grandad collected all of James Herriot's **All Creatures Great and Small** memoirs and I consumed them. Growing up in Huddersfield, I felt I could relate to the Yorkshire people, the animals and the countryside.

First concert I went to

I've never been to one. I grew up in suburban Huddersfield and then became a shepherd. I embraced the culture of the countryside because that's what I wanted — to be immersed in the way of life.

First book I read to my children

Moses the Kitten by James Herriot. The illustrations in that book are gorgeous. For Christmas I bought them a new copy of James Herriot's *Treasury for Children*. With all my children, it had been worn out over the years.

First album I bought

The first cassette I bought was by **Five Star**. I was also a fan of Janet and Michael Jackson — especially *Bad* — Madonna and Bros.

First instrument I could play

As a child I wanted to be Jacqueline du Pré but my mum wouldn't let me play the cello because she said I'd make holes in the carpet. I was stuck playing the **French horn**. To add insult to injury my younger sister was allowed to play the cello because my mum didn't care about the carpet at that point.

First film I saw at the cinema

I went to see **Bambi** when I was maybe six or seven, but I was taken out when the mother was shot because I couldn't stop crying. It put me off going back to the cinema

for years, so the next film I saw was *Titanic*, but I got really fed up watching people drown and I've not been back.

First pop-inspired fashion trend I adopted

I had a **goth era** when I was about 16 when I wore paratrooper boots, tights with holes, a travel blanket knotted behind my neck and waist, some sort of maxi skirt and lots of black eyeliner. You think it's a rebellion but lots of people are doing it better than you. Being a shepherd was a far better way to rebel because nobody else was doing that.

WATCHIT

Our Farm Next Door: Amanda, Clive and Kids is on Mondays, 9pm, on More4

First moment I knew I wanted to be a farmer

I was about 15 when I told my careers adviser at school that I wanted to be a vet, to which he said: "Amanda, you're not academic enough." So I went to the library and found a book called **Hill Shepherd**. I thought being able to work with animals on the moorland was gone, then here was a book of photographs from the here and now of shepherds doing just that. And I thought, hell yeah.

First famous person I met

Richard Gere at the premiere of his 2012 film *Arbitrage*. I don't remember much of what he said because he looked too scrubbed and pink. He looked like he'd spent longer in the bathroom than I had.

First moment I realised I'd made it

I don't think you ever smugly sit back because how could you? You're always learning. I don't look forward to a point where there isn't somebody shouting, bleating or mooing at me. When you're farming there isn't a start and an end point. It's continuous.

