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the guardian

Glenn Brown exhibition marks new direction for Upton House
Turner nominated artist will help 'breathe new life' into impressive collection of old
masters at National Trust property

By Mark Brown



*Glenn Brown's exhibition at Upton House in Warwickshire marks a new direction for curators at the National Trust property.
Photograph: Newsteam/Anita Maric*

About 80 years ago the spectacularly wealthy heir to the Shell fortune Walter Samuel had bought so much art he had to convert the squash court at Upton House to hang works by the likes of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel.

Now, under the aegis of the National Trust, the grand country house is to stage its first show by a contemporary artist, the Turner prize nominated Glenn Brown, whose work will hang alongside a stupendous art collection that includes El Greco, Canaletto, Hogarth and Reynolds.

"We want to show we are not pickled in aspic," said Upton's collections manager Rachael O'Connor-Boyd, explaining why they had invited Brown to exhibit. "We want to breathe life into our collections."

But Brown is a painter steeped in art history, often deconstructing and reconstructing specific works or techniques. One work in the show is a striking grisaille painting – using only black and white paint – which is based on a Boucher drawing. Appropriately, one of the stars of the Upton collection is a Bruegel grisaille, *Death of a Virgin*.

The Brown works, all from his own collection, are being exhibited in the squash court, created 80 years ago because the original court had to be used as a picture gallery. "It's come full circle," said O'Connor-Boyd.

The show has been organised by the West Midlands-based Meadow Arts, which presents contemporary art to new audiences, often in unusual spaces. Its director Anne de Charmant said: "We've been doing this for about 12 years and people looked at us as if we were completely mad when we started out – now it has become quite a trend."

She said Northumberland-born Brown had "an almost instinctual response" to the project. "There is this wonderful thing Glenn does and I don't think any other painter does [it] – he questions the existence of painting itself," she said.