



Above right: Louis Turpin at work in a garden near Rye. *Iris at Towersey Manor*, above left, and *The New Border at Pettifers*, opposite – valued at £1,800 and £2,300 respectively – are part of a project for the National Gardens Scheme, in which people raise funds for charity by opening their gardens to the public

Gardener in oils

The man who creates the most beautiful gardens in Britain does it not with a fork and spade, but with a brush and paint

Louis Turpin's love affair with the gardens of Britain began a decade ago, when the painter visited Sissinghurst in Kent where Vita Sackville-West once lived. By chance, Turpin met an elderly lady who had worked with her to create the magnificent garden there. He left Sissinghurst with a clear vision of the way he now wanted to paint.

"The gardens in this country are unique," he says, "because our unpredictable climate ensures that you never know what to expect from one season to another. That's what differentiates them from the gardens you find in Italy, and also what excites me as an artist looking for inspiration – the unexpected that catches and holds the eye."

From a cramped studio in the picturesque estuary town of Rye in Sussex, Turpin works to capture the texture of leaf, soil, bud and blossom of gardens in their seasonal prime. As the paintings reproduced here show, he loves to work with bright light and colour: as one art critic noted, "his palate is often hot and strong".

Yet the riot of colours never overwhelms the senses, and Turpin's stylised technique enables him to combine vitality with the shades and stillness inseparable in the mind's eye from the

classic English garden. Turpin, 48, was born in south London and studied architecture for 18 months before changing course and enrolling at the celebrated Falmouth School of Art, where part of his course involved making films.

After graduation, he made a good living in the film trade, mostly in animation, "but I never stopped dreaming of getting away from London – and the sea always drew me very strongly."

Settled in Rye with his wife Davida, whom he has painted many times, and two sons, Turpin steadily moved away from the abstract, turning increasingly to his rural environment.

Over a beer at his local, the Ypres Inn – where his portrait of the landlord and his wife hangs between two of his garden paintings – he recalls the days when he was lead singer and guitarist in a group called the Turpin Brothers.

"We were offered a record deal, but they warned me it would be impossible to combine that with painting – so rock'n'roll lost out." One link to

the music business remains, however, through Paul McCartney, who regularly buys his work.

Turpin's paintings hang on the walls at National Westminster Bank's headquarters, the Fondation Elebor in Switzerland and the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, and last year he exhibited at the summer shows of the Royal Academy and the Royal Society of Portrait Painters. His new series of Oxfordshire gardens can be seen at the

Bohun Gallery, Henley-on-Thames, from September 15 to October 10.

The long heatwave has not been kind to the gardens that Turpin observes minutely and lovingly through the seasons, bleaching out the most vibrant colours

and killing flowers and plants that should now be in their prime. "Normally I love this time of year most of all, because everything has become a bit jungly and anarchic. It is," he concludes, "the essence of the real English garden."

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'British gardens are uniquely unpredictable. That's what excites me as an artist'