



Photography by Matthieu Lavanchy

MARTIN BRULÉ'S AMERICAN DREAM

Words by Chris Cotonou

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hen the interior designer and decorator Martin Brûlé first moved to New York from Montreal, he lived in a small Upper Manhattan apartment that was no bigger than his current closet. “Once I got in, I upholstered the walls in a leopard print fabric that I just found and I perfectly embroidered my initials on the bedding,” he tells me, as we catch up on a bright New York morning. “Looking back, I have no idea how I would’ve paid for that. But I did it. I loved that place.”

The 38 year-old Brûlé, who is self-trained, has worked on numerous spaces since that first apartment, but his approach remains the same. His portfolio of largely private, rarely-published residential sites reveals a DIY ethos that makes the most of his exquisite personal taste: a characteristic, sometimes monochromatic, understatement and a restrained opulence that comes from adding the best in class, whether that is in the period furniture he is able to uncover, or the early 20th-century objects and art that he is famously passionate about.

When we speak, Brûlé is being driven to a building in Manhattan where he is expected for a meeting with fashion house Alaïa at the Brant Foundation. “It’s going to be fun,” he says about the project. “It’s more curatorial work, but I’ve also designed a dining room for a private dinner.” His car arrives outside the Brant Foundation, where the team from Alaïa are waiting. “Martin Brûlé” he says into the speaker by the door, announcing his arrival. “Can I have a moment?” There are people looking at him from inside. “I have a lot going on,” he smiles.

His Martin Brûlé Studio operates over a diverse spectrum of projects, from small curatorial dinners like the above, or large properties – including a recent and more publicised work at a country home in Hudson Valley. Out of the eight projects he and his team have as of writing, there are three that he is most excited to tell me about. The first is an apartment in 740 Park Avenue, an iconic building designed by the great architect Rosario Candela (1890 – 1953). It is a dream canvas for Brûlé’s imagination: he is especially passionate about 1930s Modernist Art Deco architecture and aesthetics. “The space is architecturally so solid and perfected, that I get to focus on the part I love the most, the decorating” he says. “It feels like achieving a dream of that Elsie de Wolf and Frances Adler Elkins style of American decorating because you have these spaces; a perfect gallery, a perfect drawing room, a great library—it’s all there.” The other two are in London (converted artist studios in Chelsea, with a complete gutting, and refashioning, of the interiors) and Madrid (a 19th century Palacio, returning to its original splendour). Brûlé’s to-do list is never the same, and it is never ending.

Brûlé sees his work as “creating an atmosphere,” he explains: “It’s more than decorating.” So it’s unsurprising that his ideal project (hopefully one that will take shape in the future) would be a small Martin Brûlé designed hotel, with a restaurant, a nightclub, and a lobby “that everyone wants to hang out in,” he tells me.

Earlier this year, Brûlé opened a Paris outpost to manage his projects in Europe. Demand is increasing across the Atlantic, and he now splits



his time between America and France. But the United States remains his first love. As an outsider, the “*fantasy*” of America – a term he used to describe the Hudson Valley project – is a theme he remains conscious of when designing in American spaces. “*I think there’s so much to take from the aesthetics of this country. There’s a very specific level of taste here that has been a huge influence on me and my work. It is this beautiful mix of comfort and utilitarianism,*” he explains. “*When I speak of America, I speak of the parts I know and I have lived*

Before arriving in the United States, Brûlé was a young man from Montreal with an imagination that was yearning to be turned into expression. “*Even when I was a very small child, I was always dreaming up how to make my parents’ home more beautiful,*” he says. “*But I was coming from a place (Montreal in the 90s) where the world of high culture, art, and beauty is not a part of the conversation.*” Fortunately, there were formative people who, although unaware of it at the time, sparked his imagination. One of them was a friend of his mother, who he recalls being so elegantly dressed, it made a strong impression. (“*She also had a*



in: New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. And there’s so much identity. But early twentieth century decorators like Billy Baldwin and Frances Adler Elkins have had a huge influence on what I do. They took this refinement from France, England, or Italy, and made it into something that’s so livable, and so much more approachable. I’ve lived in Paris and spent a lot of time in London. But America and New York represent true freedom for me,” he smiles, as if realising it for the first time: “*I love this country, actually.*”

tastefully designed home.”) Then there was an uncle who sometimes visited from Hong Kong, who brought with him the fantasy of a world that existed beyond Montreal. “*I saw him very few times in my youth, but he stuck out to me. He would wear 1990s Giorgio Armani. He was very handsome and eccentric, unlike anyone else I knew, and he would make me dream about far away places.*” Everything was about escape for a young Brûlé. “*I spent so much time in my head,*” he says, reflecting on his youth, “*but I learned to make that a positive thing.*”





That same uncle would take Brûlé to the cinema to see Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), where the image of villain Marcellus (Ving Rhames) and his wife Mia Wallace's (Uma Thurman) tasteful Beverly Hills home became an early, and unlikely, interior design inspiration. "There's something about the aesthetics of that film that is always on my mind, which is weird because when you think of something beautiful, you don't immediately think of *Pulp Fiction*," he laughs.

Has he settled on a style that he likes, or is he always evolving? "Always evolving," Brûlé replies. But his mother's friend, his uncle, and even *Pulp Fiction*, still subconsciously guide the direction his work is heading. "Those were matters of coincidence. But when I was 20, I was mature enough to know what I was looking for," he explains. And what Brûlé wanted was to be away from Montreal, to be in the centre of the creative world; which meant, inevitably, to be in New York City: "When you go to New York, you know where you're going. You don't just end up there." And in 2016, Brûlé finally opened his Martin Brûlé Studio.

Today, he employs teams in Europe and America, he tells me, with projects throughout both continents. But he's firmly in charge of the vision and undertaking for each job, whether big or small. "I'm still the creative director and the chief, uh... furniture person," he laughs. Brûlé doesn't get much time to rest these days. When there is downtime, he likes to jump on the New York ferry alone. It carries him up through the city, as he reflects in solitude beside the office commuters, the skyline, and the water, where he feels the most content (if he could, Brûlé would have a home along the Venice canals). But then it's back to business. For Brûlé, it isn't enough being simply talented or curious. "From experience, you can

have this creativity, this vision, whatever. But the more hours you spend working on it, the better you get at it, and the better the results are."

Designing his own spaces, like his 100 sq m studio in Paris's Saint Germain-des-Prés quarter, still remains his ultimate source of creative expression: "My fantasy spaces to work on are my own. They're the greatest freedom, actually." His apartment and studio in an 18 storey Beaux Arts tower in Manhattan's East 40s, designed by architects Raymond Hood and Kenneth Murchison, was covered by the *New York Times* in 2021, who commented on his appreciation for "an opulence that is invisible". The apartment's decoration has changed since then – a reflection of his evolving taste – but still features many of the same early twentieth century motifs Brûlé incorporates in his client projects, as well as the antique treasures that he has placed thoughtfully throughout. There are also a number of sublime monochromatic pieces that reflect his penchant for minimalism (a far cry from the leopard print wallpaper in his first Manhattan apartment). "I'm a collector," he says, "I become obsessed with everything."



The same taste for beautifully-crafted, but understated, savoir-faire, which has become a hallmark of Brûlé's work, even extends into his style (his usual uniform is made up of a navy Loro Piana sweater and black Celine jeans) and into his personal philosophy. "Everything is an exercise in restraint," he explains. "Editing elements out of your work is how you get to where you need to be. That's how you define a taste." Minimalism and simplicity are attributes that come naturally to him. It is a simplicité volontaire, Brûlé tells me, finally, in his Quebecois accent.

"In French, it makes more sense," he smiles. "It's about detachment. And to be detached is how I can truly understand and enjoy an object or a space."