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## The rooms of the magnificent

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IT IS in the tiny kitchen of "Fairhall", the elegant Georgian style mansion bequeathed to Victoria in 1986 by William Robert Johnston, collector extraordinaire, that Akira Isogawa finally cracks.

"We have *cows* because they're *delicious*," he says, and giggles, pointing to the dozen-odd delicate porcelain figurines of the animals he has arranged on shelves around the room. "We have all *edible* animals in here: lambs and chickens too, but not so many cats and dogs!"







Fashion designer Akira Isogawa in 'Fairhall', aka the Johnston museum. *Picture: Joseph Feil*

Now we are all laughing - the fashion designer, the reporter and the photographer, cracking up over a silly joke, and it doesn't seem strange at all to do so in this curious place.

Every room so far on this intensely personal tour has affected us in some emotional way. It's what Isogawa intended when he accepted what was an odd invitation to "rearrange" the priceless collection of Georgian and Regency furniture, paintings and curios in Fairhall, otherwise known as the Johnston museum.

"At first I just thought, this is just beautiful, this is gorgeous," Isogawa recalls of the day a fat, glossy book, *The Johnston Collection*, arrived at his Marrickville fashion studio. "I wanted to be here, just for me, just to absorb this atmosphere. I knew nothing about Georgian or Victorian things; my background [in Kyoto] is oriental - very different! - but I was very excited."

Le Vaillant. By any stretch, the choice of a top fashion designer, known as well in Paris, New York, London and Tokyo as here in Australia for his pure, analytical aesthetic, was bound to be radical. "With Akira," says Le Vaillant, "we knew we'd be taken to a different place."

Isogawa set out first to plumb Johnston's mind. "I wanted to learn about him, like having a bath," he says now, and mimics lying back, immersed in the man's life. He named each room of Fairhall after real and imagined aspects of Johnston.

There's a vast, ground floor sitting room called "Vanity", a dainty parlour named "Powder" and a moody, masculine den Isogawa dubbed "Cigar". The "Desire" room is devoted to an aspect of Johnston's personality that Isogawa says he understands at the core of his own being. "Travel" with its plunging ships and sea-spray, "Escape" with its delicate, oriental glass painting, and "Dream", a dark, silky boudoir, all evoke worlds beyond the physical.

A staircase ascending from the realm of Johnston's public persona on the ground floor to his private world on the first, is unnamed, but its claustrophobic narrowness is intensified and charged with a sense of yearning by its clutter of romantic paintings of distant landscapes. The little kitchen, with its menagerie of "edible" animals, is Isogawa's witty take on the urbane Johnston's country weekend retreats spent at the lovely but also brutal source of "bacon and eggs and all delicious animals".

Isogawa's "canvas" was the museum's existing curtains, fittings and immovable furniture, and his "raw materials" as few or as many pieces as he was free to select from the collection's storage areas on site and at the National Gallery of Victoria. "Some [furniture and fittings] can't move, so these are like the rules," he explains. "You play within the rules."

In "Vanity", he gathered exotic gilded mirrors on to the walls and filled the shelves of a vast, elegant cabinet with dozens of miniature cameos and portraits. These tiny faces are arranged to gaze endlessly at their own reflection. "This room is too show off," Isogawa says. "All these little miniatures look at themselves. It is intensified by many. This is about respecting the self."

In the "Desire" room, he used a similar technique: archaic drawings and porcelain miniatures of perfectly proportioned Greek and Roman athletes. "I relate to this in Mr Johnston; being almost obsessed by something, you *must* have it," Isogawa says. "I travel quite a lot, like Mr Johnston. When I find something, a kimono fabric ... Desire is very difficult to control."

"I wish Mr Johnston was still around. I would like to know him. Would like to know what his opinion is of what I've done to his house!"

The rearrangement of "Fairhall", *Akira Meets Mr Johnston*, will stay until October 20. Visitors must book by phone, 9416 2515, or on the website: [www.johnstoncollection.org](http://www.johnstoncollection.org).



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