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ARTS

Now you see him, now you don't: the young Turk who keeps changing his look

As the artist Gavin Turk prepares for his show at Damien Hirst's Newport Street Gallery, he discusses what is and isn't real

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Gavin Turk in his studio
MICHAEL LECKIE FOR THE TIMES

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I've encountered Gavin Turk several times over the past 20 or so years, but I never recognise him. For once the failure is not my fault because the thing about Turk is that he keeps changing his look.

This is the artist who launched himself on the broader public imagination in the Royal Academy's infamous 1997 *Sensation* show. There he was represented by a lifesize waxwork, *Pop*, in which he appeared in the guise of a tousle-headed cross between an Andy Warhol-style Elvis and a gun-toting Sid Vicious. And that is just one of the many forms that this elusive shape-shifter has adopted in a career that, beginning in the early 1990s as he emerged from the Royal College of Art, is reaching what feels like a significant midpoint. He is now preparing for *Who What When Where How & Why*, a retrospective at the Newport Street Gallery, owned by his fellow Brit artist Damien Hirst.



Identity Crisis (1995)
GAVIN TURK/LIVE STOCK MARKET

Turk has appeared as a beret-sporting patriot on a mocked-up *Sun* newspaper splash; as a bald-pated, gold-plated Oscar statuette; as a bearskinned soldier in a sentry box and a shuffling down-and-out in gaffer-taped cardboard-box shoes; as Jacques-Louis David's murdered revolutionary Marat and as a Van Gogh self-portrait; as a paint-spattering Jackson Pollock and a felt-hatted performance artist Joseph Beuys. Last year Turk grew long God-like facial hair for an artwork dubbed *Project Beard*, to raise funds for The House of Fairy Tales, an educational organisation that he founded with Deborah Curtis, his wife, with whom he has three children. Through combing and chopping, styling

and bisecting, he set out to transform himself into a series of famous artists — from Rodin through Morris, Cézanne, Matisse and Man Ray to Dalí — in rapid succession.

It can feel equally hard to pin Turk's art to any fixed look. Over the past 25 years his pieces have slipped into any number of group exhibitions. And, encountered individually, their range can feel wide. His career began with his now-iconic blue plaque: "Gavin Turk, Sculptor, worked here" which led to a fail in his art college finals. At the time he was disappointed, he tells me: "I thought what I had done was really good." And he hadn't realised, he explains, that the college rector was on the verge of being appointed head of English Heritage and probably thought that his student was having a dig. But within weeks, what Turk took to be a disaster turned out to be his first triumph. That piece, snapped up by Charles Saatchi, brought him instant success.

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anything from sleeping bags to
loo rolls

And yet, for all that Turk found fame as a Britart figure he, perhaps more pronouncedly than his fellows, has resisted being branded and marketed.

He has taken a wide range of

stylistic tacks. He has made bronze casts, for instance, of anything from sleeping bags to apple cores and polystyrene cups, to black bin liners, chip forks and toilet rolls — all painted to look so realistic that you long to touch them to check if they are real. Turk has provided a focus for those legends about gallery cleaners attempting to dispose of contemporary artworks.

Further, Turk has crushed a Transit van into a totemic white cube; created hundreds of lifesize waxwork models, including some that are automated; taken a host of photographs and made silk-screens in which he appears in various guises. All of these will go on show in the Newport Street Gallery's exhibition, the first significant solo show of his work to be staged in this country for 15 years. Shown individually, these works can feel disparate. When brought together, however, they impress upon the visitor less a sense of their playful disparity than the serious thought that underpins it.



Nomad (2002)
GAVIN TURK/LIVE STOCK MARKET

Turk, when I meet him in a backroom of his Hackney warehouse, is wearing a blue suit and an ironic bright red artist's beret that nattily matches his felt collar trim. He is in full flow as he enters, talking about being a vegan — "It's a consciousness thing, eating and breathing, that's the human condition, and I wasn't thinking about what I was eating"— as he keeps looking at a scrap of paper. He has scribbled a list on it.

"Surreal, so real, sure-real, faux real, for-real," it says. It is an off-the-cuff play on words. And yet it captures his way of working. He follows the flow of the thoughts which, judging by his stream-of-consciousness conversation, seem to flood through his mind as he pursues his continuing project: to test the boundaries between the true and the false — "I'm always looking at the edges," he tells me, "at the point at which a thing becomes something else"— even as he recognises how easily these boundaries can shift.

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I'd love to be able to explain what the creative process is," says Turk. "You somehow put yourself into what is hopefully the right place and then,

probably while you are doing something else, a little germ of an idea comes along." A conversation that began with his vegan proclivities and concerns about the population explosion — "When I was born in 1967 there were 3.5 billion people on the planet; now there are 7.5 billion" — progresses to his desire to cut down on how much he consumes.



Turk's heritage plaque to mark his work at the Royal College of Art
GAVIN TURK/LIVE STOCK MARKET

He has made a lot of pieces about rubbish, he points out. And although they were made to be seen in isolation and so didn't necessarily speak the same language, things connect them. "The apple cores," he explains, "are obviously organic and the Styrofoam isn't. But apparently there are mealworms which can eat Styrofoam which passes out of them, non toxic, at the end. But then the mealworms will turn into beetles. I

suppose we will have to kill the beetles," he pauses, realising that he is about to set off on a long digression. "These the sorts of things that are in my mind," he says, before setting off on another tangent, progressing via the energy cycles of the planet and Madame Blavatsky's theories of the occult and their similarities to those of particle physicists — "She is also trying to talk about energy" — to the idea of the artwork as being, like Blavatsky, a hoax or illusion.

"I am very interested in the idea of what is real and what is not real — like the ready-made," he explains. "It's still real, but it's become like a picture of its former self. As an artist, you try to make something look so much like something else that you have to touch it to believe what you have been told." And that in a sense carries us, Turk suggests, back to the fundamental idea: "that art questions truth". But as an artist, Turk continues, you start turning into your "character". "You get slotted into a box where everything that you might do is an artwork. You can turn the outside world into art. Your life becomes a performance."

Turk's work can be interpreted on a significant level as a probing of identity. It's all "about being somebody and nobody," says Hirst, the owner of many of the works that will be shown in the exhibition. But what emerges, in the long run, feels more complicated than this familiar paradox. Turk's art, he suggests, is less about trying to express a truth than about "questioning the place where you would have to stand to have a conversation about truth. I have always wanted to get to that vantage point in my work: to find that meta-truth that you have to have if you are going to expose that the truth is that there is no truth."

Gavin Turk: Who What When Where How & Why is at the Newport Street Gallery, London SE11 (020 3141 9320), from November 23 to March 19

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