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Who What When Where How and Why: Gavin Turk questions everything at Newport Street Gallery



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Gavin Turk, Pop, 1993 CREDIT: GAVIN TURK, LIVE STOCK MARKET

By Louisa Buck

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Gavin Turk is the third artist from Damien Hirst's personal collection to be given a solo exhibition in Hirst's Newport Street Gallery and he's also the first to be actively involved in shaping its format.

So what you see at the aptly named Who What When Where How and Why is not only a survey of Turk's work spanning from his art school days up to this year, but also a close, vivacious and often playful dialogue between two artists who have a long shared history.

Turk and Hirst are almost exact contemporaries - Hirst is just two years older - and have known each other for over three decades. "I started collecting Gavin's work 20 years ago," Hirst has declared. "He's an incredibly powerful artist. His work is about language and the spaces between things - about identity and being somebody and nobody. He plays with our preconceptions of what's there and not there, of what art is and how it functions."



Gavin Turk, *Cave*, 1991 CREDIT: GAVIN TURK, LIVE STOCK MARKET, PHOTO PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOC

Certainly many of these questions were aired in Turk's now notorious Royal College degree show in 1991 which immediately propelled him to wide attention – including that of Hirst.

The story has now become part of the Gavin Turk legend: the provocative exhibiting of an empty studio containing just a blue ceramic 'heritage' plaque on the wall bearing Turk's name and dates of occupancy; the subsequent refusal of the college authorities to give Turk his MA, swiftly followed by his elevation to art stardom.

He was almost immediately collected by Charles Saatchi, featured on the cover of the then-recently-founded *Frieze* magazine and became one of the founding artists of White Cube Gallery.

The little blue plaque again occupies an extensive, empty atelier-like space at Newport Street and you are still brought up short by the bold and risky gesture of a then-young artist memorialising himself and his legacy before his career had even started.



Damien Hirst and Gavin Turk CREDIT: PRUDENCE CUMMING ASSOCIATES

Yet at the same time it now stands out as just one among many key works which illustrate Turk's ongoing exploration of authenticity, originality and how we value artworks and build artistic reputations. Or, as he puts it, "I use art as a process of thinking about what art means to me, and as a way of finding solutions to the problem of what art is".

As this exhibition confirms, these investigations span far and wide and assume multifarious forms. Even before his controversial MA show Turk was already playing with the work of art-historical giants, producing his own heavily corroded versions of American Minimalist Robert Morris's iconic pristine mirrored cubes that he remembered seeing as a child in the Tate Gallery.



Gavin Turk, Who What When Where How & Why Gallery 6 CREDIT: VICTOR MARA LTD, PHOTO PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOC

At Newport Street these early and precociously resolved works share a room with a more recent series of convincing Jackson Pollock lookalikes which on close scrutiny are built up out of repeated dripped and flicked versions of Turk's signature. Turk himself appears in the utterly convincing guise of Pollock in action, in close emulation of Hans Namuth's classic Jack the Dripper photographs made in 1950.

The chameleon-like Turk is astonishingly adept at adopting the guise of other artists' work, identity and legacy in what is part homage, part investigation, part parody and part knowing appropriation of the now-well trodden artistic path of appropriation itself. Warhol is a special favourite.



Gavin Turk, Who What When Where How & Why Gallery 4 CREDIT: VICTOR MARA LTD, PHOTO YUKI SHIMA

Multiple riffs on Andy Warhol have included the re-staging of Andy's car crashes using a white transit van, donning a fright wig to feature in silk screens as the great man and – most famously – creating a life sized waxwork of Turk as Sid Vicious, shooting from the hip in the same pose as that in which Warhol depicted Elvis Presley in 1963.

All of the above are in Hirst's holdings and he and Turk evidently had a great time creating their show-stopping homage-to-Andy room. In it, Warholesque silk-screened images of Turk-as-Sid/Elvis are hung on vivid wallpaper, depicting repeated rows of vivid printed lips, twisted not into Marilyn's smile, but Turk-as-Sid's snarl.

Pop, the classic gun-slinging waxwork itself, is also now in Hirst's collection and here it keeps dramatic and disconcerting company with a range of other life-sized Turk dopplegangers. There's a waxwork of the artist in the derelict tramp guise, as a mechanised fairground laughing sailor and as a Guardsman in a sentry box.



Gavin Turk, *Tip*, 2004 CREDIT: © GAVIN TURK, LIVE STOCK MARKET, PHOTO PRUDENCE CUMING ASSOC

He also appears in a giant photograph in the role of Jean-Paul Marat, martyr of the French Revolution, immortalised in Jacques-Louis David's famous 18th-century painting lying stabbed in his bathtub. There's another Turk as a bronze human fountain, squirting his head with hot water in homage to the Italian artist Alighiero Boetti.

A key element within this show and of Turk's continuing probing of the whys and wherefores of art is his Trash Culture series in which he meticulously remakes items of rubbish – bin bags, chip forks, takeaway cartons, polystyrene cups – in cast, painted bronze. These bits of detritus, which are rendered using the finest of traditional skills, litter the gallery floors and snag us into considering the categories we apply both in art and in everyday life.

Of course they are also laden with multiple cultural references. A painted bronze pavement, pocked with trompe l'oeil blobs of chewing gum is arranged in the format of a classic Carl Andre minimal floorpiece (though you can't walk on Turk's). The giant, shining, black painted-steel replica building skip that fills the last gallery also pays homage to the Minimalist's no-nonsense utilitarian aesthetic, as well as tipping its hat to Marcel Duchamp, whose urinal was, after all, just another mundane container for waste.

Like all great art, Turk's work also gathers meanings beyond its maker's original intentions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the show's final work: a giant black refuse sack in painted bronze which bulges ominously, its contents threatening to burst forth and cause filthy chaos. Its title? American Bag.

Gavin Turk: Who What When Where How and Why is at Newport Street Gallery from 23 November 2016 until 19 March 2017. Newport Street London, SE11 6AJ; newportstreetgallery.com

