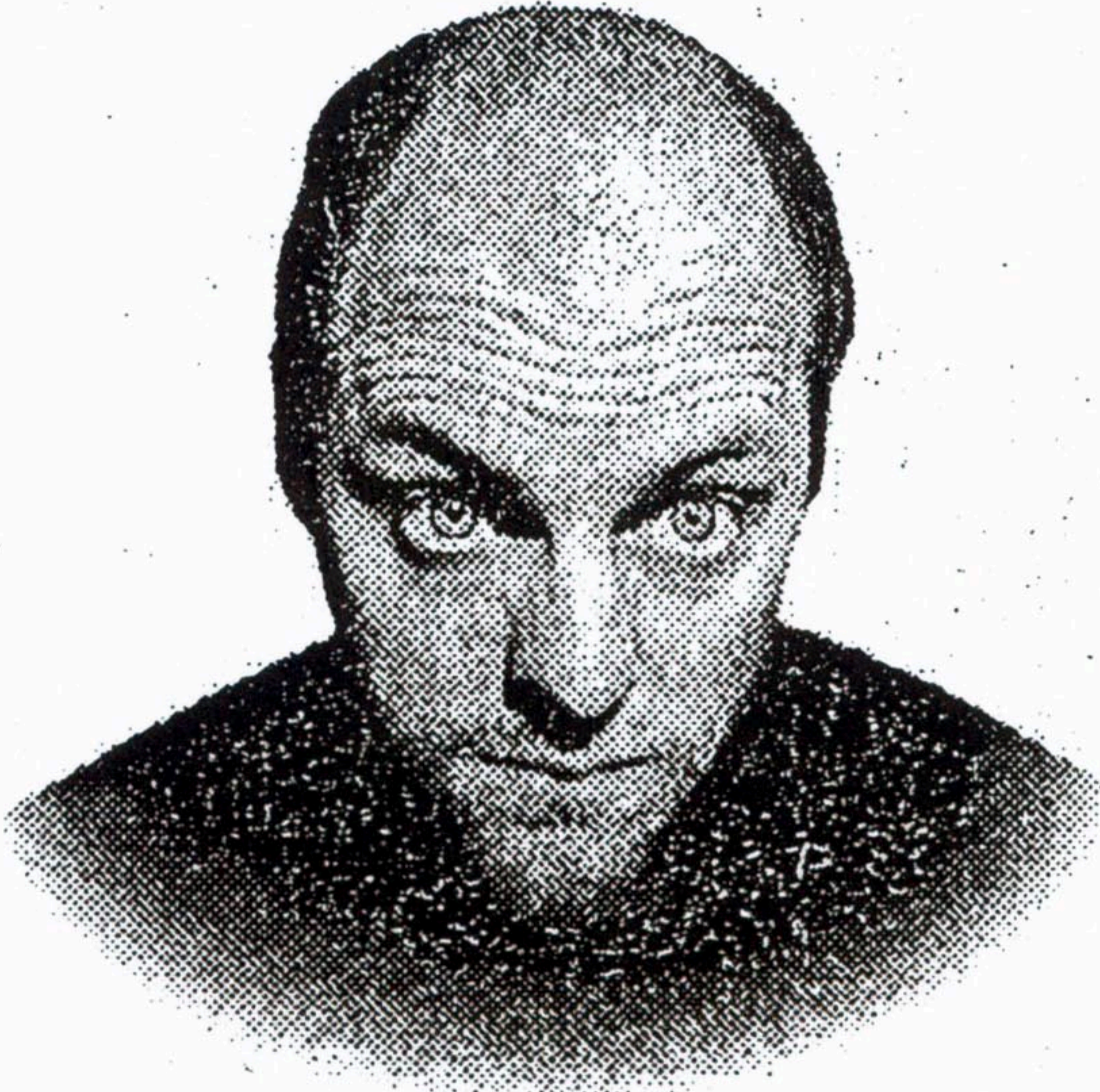


## COMMENT & ANALYSIS | 25

# Diary



### GAVIN TURK

*The mixed-media artist reflects on Mars, giving up smoking and bodily matters*

Since October I have been organising my new exhibition. I seem to have created a bit of a ripple in the news by keeping the contents a secret. "Is this another one of those pranky manipulating stunts?" journalists seem to be asking. I guess they need the beans spilled in their direction. In fact, I thought it would be good if it was a bit of a surprise. All too often art has to look good on the page – as writing – before, or even instead of, its appearance in the flesh. The art object, being actually seen, limits the audience, but that is the best way to see it.

Annoyingly, during these weeks of maximum public exposure – both of my work and, inevitably, of myself – my skin has broken out in a nasty flair of eczema and I feel like a walking, scaly freak. Lying on the couch like a novice pin-cushion last week, as the acupuncturist popped out of the room for half-an-hour, I found myself musing on the bizarre world of the body in relationship to science and the ancient arts. There popped into my mind the unfortunate image of a greasy, sausage-like thing appearing from inside a peeling cigarette. I think this rather gruesome anti-smoking campaign has missed the point that smokers embraced the abject years ago. Would it not be far better to advertise the glamour associated with *not* smoking?

Talking of glamour, while I have been planning the show, I've been listening to my new iPod. Apparently it's only me, David Beckham and the owner of the White Cube gallery, Jay Jopling, who were lucky enough to receive this slick gadget at Christmas, as demand outstripped supply and created a world shortage. Everyone comments on it, and I'm realising that it's a fantastic posing accessory. What people don't realise is that this machine is full of strange tunes from the likes of The Shaggs (1960s parallel-universe outsider pop), The Poetics (artists Mike Kelly and Tony Oursler) and Root (an art/music compilation made in response to a

10-second guitar loop by Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth). These tunes are so obscure, and virtually impossible to listen to, that even the iPod itself can't recognise them beyond calling them "Track 1" and "Track 2". I have growing suspicions about that irreplaceable battery, but I'm sure these will be allayed when I receive my sponsorship from Apple one of these days.

These thoughts about escalating technological consumerism bring me to the space talk that's returned to our mass consciousness. The *Robot Wars*-style British effort, with its enigmatic manager, was strangely inspiring, and my family was gutted when Beagle 2 got lost. This home-made pod, with its cultural exports from Damien Hirst and Blur on board, had reached Mars before the slick Nasa outfit got there and started putting out pictures of the surface. In the end, Hollywood won the Great Egg Race.

Another fantastically expensive capital development opens its doors this month, as the £4.5m Camden Arts Centre renovation is completed. This adds to the dazzling portfolio of public contemporary art spaces that have opened in Britain over the past few years, with the Tate setting the agenda for every town in the country – from Dundee to Margate – to get its own flagship gallery. The trouble is that the British public's most accessible contemporary artist is the rather prosaic Jack Vettriano. I may not like his stuff, but I do like the fact that people are buying it and putting it up at home. I love seeing people picking some ready-made picture off the wall. There's a lesson here in marketing, which a lot of galleries and museums have a problem with. Maybe the chameleonic talents of Stephen Snoddy, in his capacity as director designate of the Baltic in Gateshead, can turn things around.

Meanwhile, this month sees British art going on new international offensives. A British Council exhibition hits Tehran, in Iran, with all the subtlety and campness of Robert Kilroy-Silk. Having erroneously pruned its curation of any potentially difficult works – such as the spiked wheelchair by the Palestinian-born Mona Hatoum – the show presents Hirst *et al* to the still-grieving Iranian people. Thankfully, this political correctness is, however, a British malaise because, as Dr Sami-Azar, the director of the Tehran museum, was quick to point out, it was the British Council's rather conservative decision to remove these works.

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Gavin Turk's new show, 'The Golden Thread', opens on Friday at White Cube, 48 Hoxton Square, London N1