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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Here's looking at yourself

The artist Gavin Turk, 44, one of the original YBAs, talks about tea stains, rusty nails and why he has an obsession with leaving his imprint everywhere

Ria Higgins Published: 19 February 2012



Gavin Turk worked with prisoners across the UK to create his new show (Paul Stuart)

I'm not an early-morning person, but having three children means you get used to it, so I'm up by 7 o'clock. After I wash and throw on jeans and a shirt, I give our 11-year-old boy,

Caesar, a nudge to get up. Either Deborah or I will go down, make some tea and put out breakfast, which is normally cereal or toast. We live in a house in Hackney, not far from the kids' schools and my studio, so the two eldest, Curtis, who's 17, and Frankie, who's 16, head off, while I drop Caesar off on my way to work.

I used to live and work in the same place, but I ended up not knowing where art started and life stopped, so for the last 10 years I've been renting a place that's close to the new Olympic site. I've divided it into various spaces to accommodate the different work I do, from making large prints to drawing fleas.

I usually start the day in my office, going through emails and working up a thirst for a second cup of tea. I love the idea that drinking tea is such a cultural preoccupation, that every morning

millions in the UK perform the same ritual. I even love the most trivial things about it, down to the brown rings left every time you put a cup down. A few years ago I actually took 1,000 pieces of white paper and on each one made a unique tea ring, and signed them all.

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In a similar vein, I'm interested in taking objects of no worth and celebrating them. A good example is the white polystyrene cups you get in a takeaway. I started making bronze casts of them, bite marks and all, and painted them to look real. In the end I did a series of bronze throwaways — apple cores, chip forks, matches, bin bags, that kind of thing.

I've two full-time people working with me — Dominic Berning and Meri Atkin — and as many as six freelancers who help out. By 1pm we stop and have lunch together, taking it in turns to cook. Being an artist can be quite a lonely occupation, so it's good to break the day with a bit of chitchat. When I was young, I was a shy sort of a boy and a bit of a daydreamer. I loved drawing but my mum says I was very self-critical and would always tear my work up.

I was born in Guildford and went to several schools, including a boarding school in Seaford. I've one brother who's 17 months younger than me and while he followed Dad into the family jewellery business, I went to the Royal College of Art. At the time, I was interested in ideas about identity and, in particular, how I could manipulate my image and name. For my degree show, I made a blue plaque marking my life as a sculptor. My tutors weren't very impressed and failed me, but it coincided with the emergence of a bunch of provocative artists, vaguely all connected, who became known as the YBAs — Young British Artists — and I became one of them.

That was in the late 1980s, and the YBAs obviously aren't that "young" anymore. But funnily enough, I unveiled my first outdoor public sculpture last year, ironically harking back to my blue plaque. It's called Nail and it looks exactly like a rusty old nail, only it's made of bronze and it's huge — rising 12 metres into the sky. It looks like a giant has hammered it into the pavement and, being a stone's throw from the architecture of St Paul's and the new, slick facades of Jean Nouvel's shopping centre, I love the juxtapositions it throws up, not to mention the religious symbolism — this tiny tool has a lot to answer for.

Of course, afternoon tea is a must, as is a biscuit or two. And even the cheapest packet hasn't escaped my scrutiny. Not that long ago, I sold Rich Tea biscuits for £25 each at an art car-boot sale. Of course, I left my mark on each one by taking a bite out of it and signing it. I knew people would think: "Why on earth would I buy a signed biscuit for £25?" But that's what I liked about it. I ended up selling 150 and still sell them on my website — only now they're £108.

My mind is now on my latest show, Gavin & Turk. It's a return to the idea of a name representing a whole brand, and it's a collaboration with Fine Cell Work, a charity that teaches needlework to prisoners to help them with rehabilitation. We worked with 35 prisoners from prisons all over the UK, and among the tapestries on show are colourful permutations of my name.

I'll get home in time to sit down and hear what everyone's been up to over dinner. It's not unusual for the kids to then disappear into their computers for the rest of the night, and I do worry about that, but I'm just as guilty of it too. Deborah and I are usually in bed by midnight and although my mind is buzzing, I don't have trouble getting to sleep. I guess I know I can be an artist all over again tomorrow.

Gavin Turk is showing new work in the show Gavin & Turk until April 20 at [Ben Brown Fine Arts](#), London, W1, [benbrownfinearts.com](#)

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