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## Gavin Turk: the Young British Artist who has been raising hackles for 25 years

Gavin Turk may prove to have been the intellectual of the YBA generation, says Mark Hudson.



Gavin Turk, formerly one of the Young British Artists, is now an established force in the British art world. Photo: Rii Schwaer



By Mark Hudson

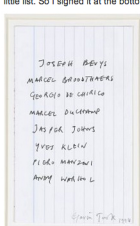
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Gavin Turk's studio is located off a dual carriageway in east London, in a post-industrial hinterland of car breakers and scrap yards: surrounded by crushed vehicles, old tyres and stacks of builders' skips. This sense of material transformation continues when you enter the studio. A car exhaust system left outside has been cast in bronze and painted to resemble the original. A bin bag full of rubbish – one of Turk's signature objects – is screen-printed onto a sheet of polished steel, while a gloss-painted black skip becomes a monolithic sculpture. But the object that is treated to the most extensive transformation is Turk. Glancing around you see his features absorbed into an **Andy Warhol** self-portrait. Turk in a Van Gogh-esque painting of a laughing sailor. Turk as **Elvis**. Turk as **Joseph Beuys**. Turk as Che.

In the studio office Turk is examining the proof of a postcard of a work of his from 1994, *Beuys, Broodthaers, de Chirico, Duchamp, Johns, Klein, Manzoni, Warhol*: simply a filing card with a handwritten list of these artists whom he was, he says, "looking at at the time".

"I was about to throw it away and I thought, that's quite an interesting little list. So I signed it at the bottom and thought, that's OK."



'Beuys, Broodthaers, de Chirico, Duchamp, Johns, Klein, Manzoni, Warhol' by Gavin Turk, 1994

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It's just the sort of cocky, but compelling gesture that's guaranteed to raise the hackles of the it's-not-art brigade, and which established Turk and his fellow YBAs – Young British Artists – as art superstars in the mid-Nineties. Love them or loathe them, **Damien Hirst**, **Tracey Emin**, the **Chapman Brothers** et al – and not least Turk himself – transformed the British art scene, raising its profile internationally, while massively expanding interest in and acceptance of contemporary art, particularly among young people. Turk's best-known contribution to the era of dead sharks and unmade beds was *Pop*, a life-size waxwork of himself as Sid Vicious, pointing a revolver at the viewer in a pose derived from an Andy Warhol image of Elvis.

Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1997 in *Sensation*, the notorious exhibition of works from Charles Saatchi's collection, it established Turk as one of the leading artists of his generation.

While many prime-movers from that period have fallen by the wayside, Turk, now 45, is an established force in British art. His achievements of the past quarter of a century are gathered in a hefty new tome, titled *Gavin Turk*, published by Prestel next month. A selection of these works is also on show at Ben Brown Fine Arts in London.

Sprawled on a chair, Turk comes across as part rock star-part philosopher. He combines the Estuary English nonchalance you'd expect of a generation who proverbially made art rock'n'roll, with a discursive manner of speech in which ideas, speculation and references to art history collide as they do in his work.

"Since Velázquez and *Las Meninas*," where he put himself into a portrait of the Spanish royal family, "art has really been about the artist," says Turk. "The artist is the process. So in using myself in my art I'm just making that very obvious. I'm an available tool that I can transform and change in my work."

Turk may yet prove to have been the intellectual of the YBA generation. He's absorbed a lot of critical theory – a lot of political ideas about representation, society and language – in a way that's been typical of a certain kind of artist over the past three decades. Yet at the same time he's very concerned with the way his art is received by the ordinary viewer. "I'm not just throwing in references as a game for art experts," he says. "I'm trying to make art more readable, to expose the way art works. You can't just leave people with nothing." While many of the YBAs paraded their origins at the rough end of British society – notably Hirst, Emin and **Sarah Lucas** – Turk was born in Guildford and raised in Cobham in Surrey, the son of a successful jeweller in London. I'm intrigued to discover that we went to the same school and had the same art teacher, he somewhat after me. Yet while this puts me in an excellent position to reconstruct his discovery of art, Turk – in marked contrast to Emin – doesn't seem interested in the dramas of his own life. Trying to turn his youth into a classic escape from suburban anonymity doesn't really stick.

"I never really felt that," he says. "I was quite anxious as a teenager, quite hyped up and not sure what to do with it. I was a bit of a dreamer, I suppose. But I always liked art. When I was small and other kids came to the house we'd go and draw. They'd get bored quite quickly, but I'd still be there drawing away."

What would he have been drawing? "I can't remember. Probably comic book heroes, Judge Dredd."

He got an A in his art A-level, and went to art college in nearby Kingston, because "I wanted to find out what it was I liked about art" – which feels quite a rarefied motivation in a teenager, compared to, say, having a burning passion to do it or simply not being able to think of anything else to do. While doing his degree at Chelsea School of Art he discovered the world of ideas, from Plato to the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School, which informed much of his subsequent work.

While it's been a matter of pride in this country that the YBAs were a British phenomenon, it's apparent talking to Turk how much they owed to American models: "The art I thought of as contemporary was mostly American: **Jeff Koons**, **Cindy Sherman**, **Richard Prince**," he says. "It existed in relation to shopping and brands, and was very aware of how it was going to be consumed. We were following on, trying to find a way to exist in our own space."

Turk finally encountered controversy at the Royal College of Art, where instead of mounting a postgraduate degree show he simply whitewashed his space, and erected a blue, English Heritage-style plaque reading "Gavin Turk Sculptor worked here 1989-91". When the college authorities refused him his MA, the event made the newspapers. The work, or some might say non-work, which he called *Cave*, was seen as a brilliantly subversive up-yours to authority, that summed up a new, youthful, irreverent mood in British art. If the piece's controversial aspects were at least partly accidental – he had dismantled most of his work due to lack of storage space – it certainly highlighted Turk's flair for the snappily stylish gesture. The patronage of Saatchi, who bought the work, led to his association with the nascent YBA movement.

When the inevitable kitsch biopic is made about the emergence of the YBAs – with its cast of larger-than-life characters and plentiful clubbing and carousing – how does Turk imagine he will be portrayed?

He seems bemused by the question. "It was really about artists sticking together for survival. The previous generation had sold their work to the Arts Council and the Government Art Collection. But it seemed like all those structures were being dismantled, while the early-Nineties economic downturn was making a lot of office buildings empty. So people started using them for shows. Then you had a new generation of dealers coming through – Jay Jopling at White Cube, Sadie Coles, Maureen Paley – who were the same age as the artists. I mean, I've met Damien a few times, but he's not someone I've spent a huge amount of time with."

While Turk likes to project himself as a dreamy individual whose mind is continually absorbed in the meanings and resonances of images and the way they are received, you don't get to his position – with a sizeable studio and a team of assistants – without drive and ambition. There must have been a point where he jumped from being a perpetual student responding to circumstances to an artist focused on making it.

"It's sort of annoying," he says with a touch of resignation. "I would love to have had a life of decisive moments and powerful consequences."

"But really it's been more of a soft progression to where I am now."

*Gavin Turk: The Years* is at Ben Brown Fine Arts, London W1 (020 7734 8888; benbrownfinearts.com) until June 14. *Gavin Turk* (Prestel) is published next month

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