

Gavin Turk: I've made a career of turning trash into treasure

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Gavin Turk is celebrating 25 years with an exhibition at Ben Brown Fine Arts (Picture: Dan Dennison)

'I think we're all time travellers,' says Gavin Turk, his eyes glinting. Yet the former Young British Artist isn't out to shock. Despite turning himself into Sid Vicious, Che Guevara and Elvis Presley in past works – and famously exhibiting a blue heritage plaque bearing his name at his final degree show – Turk is no flashy showman.

We meet at his new exhibition The Years, held to accompany the publication of a monograph showcasing his 25-year career. Three brightly coloured giant eggs hang on one wall, opposite, a huge evil eye stares ominously.

On the floor, there are what appear to be a tied-up bin bag and a crumpled sleeping bag; both are cast in bronze (in an amusing moment that sums up the perils of being a modern artist, a caterer attempts to clear away the bin bag).

Dressed in a pink shirt, purple linen trousers and neon trainers, Turk riffs on topics from reality TV to the artist's signature. At times wry, at others almost coy, he talks passionately but comes across as a careful thinker rather than demented street preacher or cocky YBA.

The time travelling comment is provoked by his painted bronzes. They include a slab of cracked pavement, empty takeaway cartons, loo rolls and crushed Special Brew cans.

'I don't like things to be thrown away,' he says. 'Not that I'm nostalgic, particularly, but I do think it's quite nice to change the temporal nature of things to try to understand what the things are. To have any experience of time – to understand that we wake up tomorrow or we woke up this morning – is to be a time traveller.'

'A piece of rubbish on the street contains within it cultural stories – stories of use, of its production, of its being thrown away – the stories that this bin bag can tell are stories about who we are and how we live.'

Through Turk's transformation, those objects become beautiful. A Styrofoam cup with nibbled edges is called Filigree; another, through which holes have been punched, bears the name Holy Grail. A third – mostly torn into pieces by restless fidgeting – is labelled Liminal, describing that transition between states that appeals to Turk.

'I really like trompe l'oeil work, because it says immediately that this is both what you think it is and not what you think it is,' he says.

It's one of the reasons he's an artist. 'The main thing is just to provoke people into a feeling that there's more to get out of the world they occupy. That what they considered a concrete thought can stretch, change, repeat something else.'

His preoccupation with eggs also connects with switching between states.

'It's about what's inside and what's outside. And how do we understand space; at what point we exist and at what point the outside exists.'



View the whole gallery: Gallery: Gavin Turk

Similarly, Turk has played with the idea of the half-open door, casting frames in bronze and placing them in unexpected places (including one in a Highbury park, which his wife Deborah Curtis will turn into a 'space-time portal' at an upcoming event for their charity House of Fairy Tales), and last year making a series out of neon.

But it's in his interaction with other artists that Turk is perhaps at his most thoughtful. While he doesn't seem to mind the YBA label, he is amused by it – 'it becomes less and less relevant because everyone goes: "You're not young" – and finds a kinship with a range of big names from Andy Warhol to Marcel Duchamp.

In The Years, his bin bag has been screenprinted on to stainless steel in a piece called Pistoletto's Rubbish, while the evil eye both refers to him being 'a Turk' and is a nod to the target paintings of the 1960s.

'For me, this exhibition is a kind of musical mash-up,' says Turk. 'You come and it's like a hybrid form of art where you recognise; you don't recognise.'

He describes The Years as like a 1960s and 1970s Mod revival, pinpointing that time as 'the moment when art stops having to be a long look into history or culture, and can be something which is just pop and fun and what we do and everyday and pedestrian – it can be something that we all know about.'

Gavin Turk: The Years is at Ben Brown Fine Arts until June 14 (www.benbrownfinearts.com).

The monograph Gavin Turk is out now (£45, Prestel Publishing). Gavin Turk talks to Iain Sinclair on May 17 at the V&A (www.vam.ac.uk), and to Jarvis Cocker at the Southbank Centre on May 24 (www.southbankcentre.co.uk).

Gavin Turk

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