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Gavin Turk: The Art of Faking It

BY JOSH SIMS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIERS CUNLIFFE
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Gavin Turk defines himself as a “negative space” in the sense of being an imposter, a “blatant fake” who can provoke a deep-seated conversation about the authenticity or otherwise of works of art.



“Gavin Turd Shat Here” reads the roughly hand-drawn blue plaque over the toilet door at Gavin Turk’s studio in London’s East End. This little piece of self-deprecation is, of course, a reference to the now-not-so-Young British Artists’ graduation piece at the Royal College of Art, for which he offered up an entirely blank room, bar a blue plaque (of the kind found around London to denote the one-time residence of someone important or famous) that announced that ‘Gavin Turk, Sculptor, worked here 1989–1991’. His tutors were not impressed. Turk did not get his qualification.

“That was difficult for me at the time,” says Turk, zipped up in a padded coat against the cold of his unheated studio. “But it was also good. I was really upset, although it also gave me a story — there was an immediate mythology to it. It gave me a kind of infamy that seemed important to have at the time. People like their artists to be extraordinary. Certainly that’s a stereotype some artists play up to; or does the audience project it because it fulfils something in them? You know, ‘the enfant terrible’, ‘the wild woman of art.’”

Could he possibly be referring to Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin? His contemporaries in the Young British Artists movement arguably not only put British contemporary art back on the map in the late 1980s but also helped defined new terms of engagement, making it a public interest either to love or to loathe. They did their own thing (sharks and tents, butterflies and neon), while Turk established a reputation for making himself the centre of his own artistic output. Here was Turk as a waxwork of Sid Vicious; Turk as a screen-printed Elvis (à la Andy Warhol); Turk as an Oscar statuette; and Turk using just his signature to, depending on your view of contemporary art, transform an ordinary house brick into a work of art or an ordinary house brick with a name written on it.

“Often what’s involved is a picture of not-someone-else,” Turk explains. “It’s less me as Andy Warhol as not Andy Warhol. It’s me as negative space. I’m there as the imposter, as the fake. I try to be a blatant fake, so a conversation about authenticity can be had. Questions of what exactly you’re looking at are most important for me in terms of art. Artists can’t work directly or be straightforward. Everything has to be made through a reflexive filter. Sincerity is not really an option.”

It is the ability to analyse both what he does and how he does it in such a head-hurting way (for Turk one and the same thing, since he regards his varied art as being about the process as much as the end result) that has given him the reputation as the intellectual of the Young British Artists. His gallery has dubbed him a ‘conceptual artist’, which can be a death knell to wider interest, but which Turk convincingly defines as “an artist who works with ideas that seem to stand up more than the things themselves, which isn’t always a good thing, because I love the physicality of things and making things. But there’s a conceptual element just to thinking you’re going to do something called ‘art’. My work exists within the context of art.”

Standing in his studio, for example, is an old van exhaust pipe, one that, apparently, is actually a bronze cast, painstakingly treated to make it look like the real thing. More recently, he created another exhaust pipe, this time in Murano glass, for Berengo Studio’s ‘Glassress: White Light/White Heat — Contemporary Artists & Glass’ exhibition (at London’s Wallace Collection until 23 February 2014). “We went to Venice, saw the glass blown, hence the air, one thing changing into another, and it looks a bit like a smoking pipe, which leads us to Magritte, lungs, cycles of material,” says Turk, giving a glimpse into the thoughts that underpinned the piece.

Quite whether anyone else sees it as he does, rather than as simply an attractive object, or as something that sparks private thoughts and connections, is another thing. But, importantly, Turk has been part of the process that brought many more people to that point in the first place, as recognised by the release this year by publishers Prestel of the first monograph of his work (titled, simply, *Gavin Turk*). This is a benchmark moment he describes as being “bloody brilliant”, not least because he recognises the importance of being “able to tell a story through gathering all my work together, especially because my work jumps around so much that unless something has my name on it, you might not even know it’s by me. Now I’m established — because there’s a two-and-a-half-pound book that says I am”.

That such art books are even published by mainstream houses perhaps speaks to the newfound interest in the subject. “I think it’s great that art is bigger now,” Turk adds. “Art is there for the wider audience, not for an art elite, although that exists of course. Most artists try to make art for a wider audience. But there is always going to be an element of people feeling that art is excluding or not for them or that galleries and museums don’t show what they want to see. People want to see their clan represented in the world.”

As, in a sense, Turk does too: one of his side projects — more his wife Deborah’s in fact — is the House of Fairy Tales. This is a charity that creates and runs art workshops to help children; and persuades ‘name’ artists such as Peter Blake and Rachel Whiteread to make portfolios of work to be sold to raise money and even has them devise their own workshops (some of which they will run in schools or in conjunction with festivals or institutions such as the Tate Modern). “When we had kids we saw what seemed to be a gap between their schooling, art and childhood, and thought there was a space for this kind of thing,” Turk explains. “There’s a big return on it but we don’t want to just take excluded kids and turn them into arty excluded kids. So it’s quite a project.”

Art could work for them as it has worked for Turk perhaps, namely providing an opportunity to think big, and to make the art world think about itself and what it produces. “I am very surprised to be making a living through art,” he says, “because when I tell people what I do they look surprised, so I guess it must be unusual. Obviously I could always make more money, but then I’m not sure what I would do with it. I’d probably buy art.”

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1. Gavin Turk in his studio. “Artists can’t work directly or be straightforward. Everything has to be made through a reflexive filter. Sincerity is not really an option.”



2. Gavin Turk *Evil Eye* (2012), poured acrylic paint on tondo canvas.

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