



Déjà Vu

It's no accident that the work of British artist GAVIN TURK may remind you of something you've seen before. He speaks to LEANNE MIRANDILLA ahead of his Hong Kong exhibition

GAVIN TURK ENJOYS playing dress-up. Throughout his 25-year-long career, he has assumed the identities of Sid Vicious, Che Guevara, Buckingham Palace guards and street beggars. But this is more than a flippant pastime—for Turk, these acts are an important part of his art, allowing him to ask viewers questions about identity and the authenticity of artworks. For one series of works, he depicts images of himself posing as aforementioned famous names in waxwork and screen prints. *Pop* (1993), for instance, copies the iconic pose Warhol used for his famous screen print of Elvis Presley.

By sneakily inserting his own image into depictions of otherwise instantly recognisable personalities, the 47-year-old British artist hopes to rouse a feeling of the uncanny. “I’ve ‘become’ other artists to conjure up something that’s an obvious fake,” Turk explains over the phone, speaking from his London studio. “You recognise the work and all of a sudden—oops, it’s something you don’t recognise anymore. I force people to look twice at something.”

Aside from borrowing the appearances of well-known figures, Turk often references styles and techniques made famous by other artists, including Andy Warhol, René Magritte and Jackson Pollock. His Elvis screen prints, for instance, draw on the colourful pop art style that Warhol made famous, and the 2009 series of splatter paintings showcased in the New York exhibition *Jazzz* imitate Pollock’s signature splatter technique. “There’s a point where, unless I have my signature or face on it, you might not even know it’s a work by me,” Turk says. “I exist in other people’s styles and signatures. As an artist, I possibly don’t have any specific identity or style.”

In fact, a signature was how he made his debut in the art world. Turk, who conducted

his postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art, was refused his degree in 1991 when he chose to create a blue plaque commemorating himself for his graduation exhibition. Titled *Cave*, the plaque bore the words “Gavin Turk worked here, 1989–1991.” While the work may have been pooh-poohed by his university professors, as one might have expected, it gained him instant notoriety among art critics and the art community. “I think the business of starting my career was kind of a heroic failure in many ways,” Turk says. “It made me think about a point where a piece of art was unacceptable, and I think that’s really fascinating. It was a valuable point for me to start.”

While his first acclaimed work may be considered unusual by some, for a member of the Young British Artists movement—which includes polarising figures such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin—it’s quite tame in comparison. In fact, Turk calls his methods fairly conventional, working mostly in



ALL LIT UP
From left: *Port (Yellow)* (2012); Gavin Turk often depicts himself as famous figures in his artworks



DOUBLE TROUBLE *Gunslinger* (2011) features the artist as punk rocker Sid Vicious

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mediums such as sculpture and painting. Some of his more provocative art works include a 12-metre nail sticking out of the ground in the middle of London next to St Paul’s Cathedral (*Nail*), a bronze cast of a bin bag filled with discarded rubbish (*Trash*) and a spray-painted brick (*Revolting Brick*) valued at £3,000 that was famously stolen from a gallery and replaced with an equivalent worth 40 pence.

As a young emerging artist, Turk had to worry about earning his own livelihood, but also about caring for his first child, Curtis, who’s now 21 years old. After an unplanned pregnancy, Turk and his then-partner, now-wife, fellow artist Deborah Curtis, found themselves in the precarious position of raising a child while in their mid-20s and fresh out of art school. “It was difficult,” recalls Turk. “We didn’t have the income at that point—I was still living off of what’s referred to as ‘the dole.’ A lot of people seem to think that having a child is like making art, but it didn’t seem like that. But it really changed my perspective. Without children, your responsibility exists with you. When you have children, you tailor a set of responsibilities that

extends beyond you.”

After spending 24 years together and raising two more children—a daughter, Frankie, and another son, Caesar, the couple finally tied the knot in the spring of 2012 in what *The Telegraph* dubbed “the wackiest wedding in Britain.” The ceremony—a performance art piece in its own right—was held in the Great Hall of Hall Place, near Kent, where the two artists were doing residencies. Guests were encouraged to arrive in fancy dress; a generous tent



SUM OF ITS PARTS *Mappa del Mondo* (2008), a wool and silk tapestry depicting pieces of rubbish as a map

of costumes was provided for those who hoped to eschew the dress code for more conventional formal wear.

The couple also keep busy with The House of Fairy Tales, an art-focused non-profit founded in 2006 that aims to educate children through play. The organisation stages multiple events every year, such as craft workshops, performances and outdoor festivals, and its team comprises artists from a variety of backgrounds including theatre, film, music and the visual arts.

Do the Turk kids have the same zeal for art as their parents? "They are all quite artistic, but all in their own different ways," says Turk. "I wasn't sure they were at first. My daughter told me the other day that she wants to do an art foundation course. I thought she was going to do environmental studies."

With a monograph of his works published in 2013 and a retrospective held at the Tate Modern in 2012, one might think Turk has it made, both as an artist and as a family man. Turk, however, believes that he still has much to learn. "I'm still at my personal art school," he says. "I'm still experimenting with how I think about and approach art. I got asked a question recently about the future, and I

mumbled about a few projects I was doing, but on reflection I wished I hadn't said it. In the future, I will be able to do a lot of things that I'm not able to do at the moment. And that's what I'm looking forward to—doing things that I don't understand now, but that I will understand when I get there." ❶

Gavin Turk's solo exhibition, A, will be held on various dates in September at Ben Brown Fine Arts Hong Kong. benbrownfinearts.com



ONE EGGSHELLS *One Thousand, Two Hundred and Thirty Four Eggs* (1997), featuring the artist's blown-up signature