

ANXIETY GENERATION

Artist Stuart Semple invites Rebecca Slade to his studio to talk s



ccess, phobias and his new paintings. Photographs by Ellis Scott



We are the anxiety generation, affirmed Stuart as he leaned back into his black leather couch, his voice tempered with melancholy. His most recent work, a huge diptych entitled "Monster" looms to our left, its cast of angular models and disembodied blood red lips are intimidating at such dramatic scale. "We saw the world change; TV changed, advertising changed, music video came of age.... MTV was born, I saw Madonna happen, the Spielberg movies... It was pumped into our heads that we could do anything, with that inspirational 80s synth sound seemingly in every song...but then there were the strikes, Thatcher, we saw that the popstars were just part of a dream and now they probably work in a Texaco garage: it wasn't real."

At only 25, artist Stuart Semple has achieved an astonishing degree of success both critically and commercially, but despite his achievements he still remains an enigmatic figure on the fringes of the established art world. As I spoke with him in his frenetic East London studio I witnessed at first hand just why the nervous young man in front of me is a phenomenon.

"Look at my tongue" he exclaimed excitedly, "There are bare patches and bits all round the edge; that's called geographic tongue, which is an external image of my inner tension, I'm not absorbing vitamins properly, it's showing in my tongue...and it hurts."

We met in the early evening as the studio lay dormant and sat chatting amidst the surreal detritus of a day of industry. A wooden heart, in a crude splintered state, is propped behind Stuart's head; fresh canvases lean against the walls, a pile of gloss covered flowers, bookcases crammed with esoteric texts, a lizard house (complete with lizard), two very cluttered desks circled by reams of complicated flowcharts and lists and the leftovers from some kind of tea party overseen by a stuffed pheasant's plastic eyes fixed vacantly ahead. It was an intriguing chaos.

"My old studio was isolated, industrial, bleak, nobody would come there unless they absolutely had to. You could »

Stuart Semple and friends in his frenetic London studio.

See your breath in the winter; it was just me 9am to 5pm - painting. When I first moved here it was kind of really sparse and I had the dream of an artists factory... There was some residue in my head maybe about what Jeff Koons was up to or what Warhol had done and you know it is that kind of weird aspiration thing, where you want your art "factory" but the reality of it, well it wasn't really like that. It actually started to become its own thing, it isn't like a Koons thing or a Warhol thing and it isn't like a business premises, neither is it simply an art studio..." He giggles at his own lack of clarity then passes me a photograph; Semple is pictured lounging in a chair surrounded by a number of individuals, mostly young and some rather eccentric in appearance, the Warhol comparison is inevitable.

"My practice before now used to be so insular and I kept meeting all these talented people when I ventured into the wider world, I wanted to find out more about them, they were so intriguing... Then when I thought about the other things that I wanted to do, the off canvas projects that interested me, it seemed perfect, to involve the other creatives I've met. We could then tackle film, fashion, IPTV... Everyone in the photo has done specific things; they have all been in the studio and worked really hard... Prop makers, illustrators, make-up artists, film editors... I have found that a creative impulse can't end at the edge of the canvas, if you're a creative individual who needs to keep on making, then it comes out in loads of other ways as well, you just can't help it and the people that come to my new space have facilitated that."

Stuart's creative impulses have generated several new endeavors, including an online TV portal and clothing brand. 'Stuart Semple Industries' has grown into a



Dramatic scale: Stuart Semple with his latest piece, 'Monster'.

Overleaf: 'losing my way', Mixed media on canvas.

formidable artistic and commercial enterprise that expands into many disciplines. Many of the strange artefacts that grace the studio floor relate to the fashion project, elaborate sets are being built for the models to be photographed against. I asked him why he felt that he, as a painter, should be spending his time working on a garment:

"I think it is part of me wanting to be part of the real world again, because painting is so divorced from real life that actually these projects are kind of out there aren't they? It's just out, it's like another frontier but it's still art, it's still my work

even if it's clothing." The garment isn't just about the wearer looking decorative either, as an extension of his work the piece is inevitably ideologically loaded: Entitled "Rebels and Devils" the line is a controversial homage to a pantheon of cultural icons that intrigue and inspire Semple. The tragic Warhol muse Edie Sedgwick, the occultist Aleister Crowley and the enigmatic Syd Barrett are amongst those featured on the unusually shaped hooded top.

"Edie is really interesting, she was Andy's muse I guess, for only about a period of a year, hers is a very sad story, she could have achieved so much more but she was destined to die...The archetypal doomed starlet" Edie's is just one of several beautiful faces that are strikingly rendered in »





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Stuart’s work, on and off the canvas; his new collection titled “A tiny slice of my state of mind” (that he half jokingly refers to as his greatest hits) is littered with many ominously flawless visages grabbed from fashion shoots and advertising. This facet of his work has led to some interesting and unexpected opportunities; Stuart is currently preparing to show at two forthcoming biennials, one in Sao Paulo and another in Liverpool; the two shows have made him reconsider various aspects of his work:

“It never really dawned on me that my work was portraiture until I was asked to be included in Liverpool...it felt kind of weird that my work would be sitting next to the work of other people I admired as great painters, it is more frightening than anything, as I have never really viewed my work in that context. Sao Paulo is the furthest away I have ever exhibited and I have absolutely no clue what the culture over there is like and for somebody who is obsessed with popular culture and critiquing it, that is a bit of an unknown. Ultimately it is interesting, as the brief for the work I am making is “No direction home” and that is how I am feeling at the moment...I know where I am, but I don’t really know what my place of safety will feel like until I get there. Where home is?” This pervading sense of uncertainty, or as Stuart calls it, impending sense of doom, is something that persists as a theme of the work and an aspect of Stuart’s personality. One gets the impression that he is constantly assessing the risk that his environment and even his own body present to him; that he is a man at odds with his reality. This is perhaps understandable when you consider the tremendous rate of his success and the difficulties presented by his frequent health problems. It must be bizarre to be so young and have such demand and value attached to

your creative output; most of the artists that Stuart admires were well into their thirties before they had acquired the wealth and power that he currently enjoys.

“I guess it is scary because there are no rules; I don’t feel like there is anybody out there who is in my situation, or that I can read about. I never set out to be successful in those terms...The whole idea was just to feel like an artist, but it quickly became apparent that these days, being a successful artist is bound up with a need to understand business and a knack for self promotion. Ultimately it feels quite lonely, because I want more than anything to sit down with somebody who feels like me and for me to relate to them, but at the end of the day, I’m on my own.”

So why is he compelled to create the art that causes him to exist in such isolation? “When I was a kid my nana made paintings with oil paint and I was always really inspired by the fact that she could make these pictures. One day she opened her draw to me and gave me a pallet knife and I started using her oil paint. She showed me books on Impressionists and I’d copy the works of Van

Gogh and people like that. When I was about nine or ten my mum took me to the National Gallery and we walked round and everything looked boring and grey, to a kid it wasn’t really exciting...then at the end of one of the rooms there was The Sunflowers, the real thing. It has burnt into my head, I can still see it now...and I thought, I want to do that, I want to be the person who makes that. That was it.”

It occurred to me that the young man before me had achieved success with one foot in the art establishment and one foot in his own world. I got the impression that such a balancing act was another cause of Stuart's anxiety.

Stuart grew up in a working class suburb of Bournemouth, a strange nexus of the desperately old settling to die and the desperately young clawing to escape. This setting of material disadvantage and physical decline has obviously imprinted on his work “I grew up and we pretty much had nothing, sometimes we couldn’t even eat properly, my parents and I, there were nights when we went hungry. Then they sold the house in the property boom and we moved up North...They brought a rest home, they made some money, but I had to live there; the residents were the strangest people to me...They would be sick, have strokes and you’d never know when they would go. One of the ladies there, she was completely dumb, she couldn’t speak but she could draw amazingly... I’d sit there and watch her sketch birds and suns and flowers and she’d write words on them and it was always the most exciting thing. I grew up with them and then I would see them all be carried out, one after another. It seems strange, but psychologically I’ve always been trying to get back there, to that rest home period, because it was the one time in my life I felt safe, »



even though death was all around me, the outcome was at least certain.”

Such dark reminiscences lie at the heart of the growing Semple myth; many of his fans are attracted to this instinct he possesses to dig through the flesh of temporal joy to expose the bare bones of a more sinister reality. Semple is the Poe of Pop. His lurid paintings are bright as they speak in a vernacular that is the second language of his generation, the detritus of two decades of intensive and intrusive media bombardment; to be uncovered is an emotional pallet of unrelenting fear, disappointment and false promise. His own fear, as well as that he observes in his peers, is a constant source of material. In fact, his phobia of a repeat of a life threatening allergic reaction in 1999 is the inspiration for many of his works and the cause of an ongoing anxiety disorder. It was in the aftermath of that experience that he gave himself to his art completely. Tugging at his collar with agitation Semple recalls the events:

“Up until that day I was a normal kid, I went to art school, I was like everyone else...Then one evening I had a huge allergic reaction, my tongue swelled up so big I could hardly breathe and I found myself in a hospital bed, dying. I was terrified. My condition deteriorated rapidly...at one point I officially died, my vital signs zeroed completely. I remember thinking whilst I remained conscious that should I survive I will really become an artist and I made a promise to myself, it sounds cheesy, but I did, to myself...and to divinity, that I would...because until then art was just something I did... but then I realised that art was the one thing I felt it was worth living for. I have my ECG, the printout which shows the “flatline” the point at which I died; that’s my own artwork, just for me, it is too tender to ever share.”

It sounds just like a movie, which is ironic since his own success story is not unlike one of the gleaming but ultimately hollow pop fairytales his work critiques. Semple however, does not get to leave the set of his Artstar fantasy at night, all the insecurity, confusion and pressure of his youthful success follows him to his very real

bed.

Despite the obvious fragility of it’s creative driving force it is clear that something very exciting is happening in Semple’s studio; the scope and vision of his work is commanding considerable attention, his collaborative pieces are drawing upon the skills of many new and intriguing young creatives. It is all too easy to be reminded of the Warholian Factory, but could the anxious Semple withstand the circus of intrigue such comparisons would inevitably attract? Probably not.

“I would rather be on my own in the middle of nowhere painting my pictures, it is a quiet process, but I realised that to fulfil my ambition as an artist I cannot physically do it

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alone...Through my work I have analysed the cultural industries, so the natural progression is to create a new autonomous one, whether doing that and retaining my ideology is possible or not I haven’t proven yet, but it does feel increasingly awkward.” This discomfort however seems to be as much a part of Semple as his constantly monitored, irritated tongue. I ask him if he will ever feel safe, even without the confusing context of his life as an artist:

“I’d like to think so but I think it is extremely unlikely because for me to feel safe a whole lot of things out there in the world and inside my body that I have no control over have to change. How can I feel safe when there are thousands of people involved in the machinery of a global situation that’s driven by human ego and blind desire...how could this ever stop?” In a moment of sound bite regurgitation that reminds me of his paintings, Stuart cites one of his favourite movies, ‘Fight Club’ and grins - “On a long enough time line the survival rate for everyone drops to zero...the reality is I’m dying and the truth is I’m scared to death of that fact.”●