

Multidisciplinary artist Stuart Semple is passionate about democratising the art world



*Artist's studio*

## STUART SEMPLE

*Caiti Grove* talks democratising art and near-death experiences with the headline-grabbing artist

**N**ine million people live in London, but 57 million other people live elsewhere in England. What culture have they got, you know, what's really there?' Stuart Semple's irritation is palpable. Since moving from London to Bournemouth, the multidisciplinary artist has found the difference in cultural life stark. 'We need to see work, it's fundamental. There are lots of local artists here but where is the international perspective?' Stuart feels we need to democratise art. He recently released a luminous pink powder paint, *The World's Pinkest Pink*, selling it online under the condition that the buyer was not Anish Kapoor, a response to Kapoor's own copyrighting of an ultra-black, light-absorbing matte paint that he invented and ring-fenced for himself.

In Stuart's Bournemouth studio 15 assistants buzz around a vast space set over two floors. A 20-foot wooden skate ramp sits next to huge arched windows that look out onto the high street. Another 25 assistants are at home: they've been on rotation during Covid. Together, they work on projects like Stuart's *Happy Cloud* performance when 'eco-clouds' (made from Helium and soap) in the shape of smiley faces were released from Tate Modern during the 2009 recession. In the middle of the room, two garden sheds are editing suites for digital projects. An assistant has mocked up a miniature theatre where plasticine dinosaurs fight in a cardboard rainforest. In another corner, a lab creates acrylic and powder paints in neon shades, the luminosity a classified secret. On the other side of a stud wall is a teenage bedroom, complete with a poster of Keanu Reeves in *The*

*Matrix* and a lava lamp. 'I never want to lose that curiosity to experiment,' Stuart says. Has he ever slept in there? 'For a couple of hours following a 40-hour work stint,' and 'maybe after the Christmas party.'

It feels like an art school, but maybe this isn't a coincidence. During Stuart's first year studying at Bretton Hall in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park he suffered a severe allergic reaction and went into anaphylactic shock. 'I nearly died – it was very, very traumatic. After that point, I made very different work. It really made a massive impact on my whole life,' he says.

Today, he splits his time between this studio and another on the other side of town. Here, he creates huge canvases that portray riots and police brutality. In one, a woman sits drunk on the floor, a young man helping her up. 'This is supposed to make you think about perspective,' says Stuart. 'A man would look at this and think "that's nice – he's helping", whereas a woman might view this as a threatening situation. "Where is he taking her?"'

Back to Stuart's mission to democratise art and spread culture around the UK. This summer he opened GIANT, an arts centre in the heart of Bournemouth. Based in the old Debenhams building, there's 'big thematic group shows and new work from artists in residence, plus a reading room, an archive and a massive education programme. And a monthly nightclub – late night, until two in the morning. Like the edgiest London nightclub ever.' The question is – will Anish Kapoor get an invite?

*GIANT, The Bobby's Building, The Square, Bournemouth, BH2 5LY. giant.space* ■