

Stuart Semple is one of our most buzzed about and collected artists of recent times. His journey to success is incredibly intriguing too. At only 28, he has the eyes of the some of world's biggest collectors firmly fixed on him.

Stuart was born in Dorest on the South West coast of England. As a student he was equally as gifted at science as well as art and knew which he preferred. In the process he fought off comments such as 'You're going to be a doctor.' 'I left the school because their art department was shit really. There was nothing there so I went to art college and I enrolled in a whole heap of A-levels – to kind of please my parents – and did Art as well,' he says. 'The Art College was down the road and we'd sit in with them for a couple of hours a week to do the A-level. I was just seeing all these kids with really fat portfolios with amazing life drawings and I was like, 'I totally need to be doing that.' So, I just ended up doing that.'

Stuart went on to study A-level Art and Art History plus a GNVQ Advanced which won him a place at Bretton Hall, the prestigious college then based in a West Yorkshire stately home. There he studied Fine Art Painting and Printmaking. 'At college I was really divided between graphic design and painting. I really couldn't work out the balance, but that's why I wanted to do painting and printmaking, I thought maybe I'll be a printmaker, rather than a painter, but it didn't happen like that.'

As part of his growing success, Stuart is also represented by Martin Summers the legendary dealer of artists such as Jean Michel Basquiat, Peter Blake, Andy Warhol and Pablo Picasso. 'How did I meet Martin? I met him through a friend of mine, Uri Geller. Uri had met him – I think – at Princess Michael of Kent's barbeque or something and Uri said, 'There's this guy, he's a bit bizarre but he's like an art legend, you have to meet him.' I said, 'What do you mean?' and I went over the Martin's house and looked at it and thought 'Oh my God, this is like another world.' I hadn't seen things like that because I was used to being in these big white spaces [or] some grungy thing in Berlin, or something. Then all of a sudden I'm in this Chelsea thing and I was like, 'That's a Picasso, that's worth 20 million quid!'. 'What the hell's going on? He's never going to be into my work, he's not going to even understand what I'm going on about.' And that was it.

'Then I did a massive art show in an abandoned warehouse in Docklands. Ah, it was horrible. But Martin came down there and he bought a couple of pictures and I was quite surprised. I was like, 'What's he buying that for? That's actually really edgy.' It's a picture of Kate Moss and it says *Sex, Kill, Go Go* and it's actually not that nice and I thought, 'Does he actually understand it?' And a couple of weeks later he turns up at my studio on his little scooter and he's like, 'This stuff's amazing, you've given me a new lease of life. I want to do something with it.' And I was like, 'Alright, let's see what you can do then.'

And the Kate Moss piece has a good place in his home, doesn't it? 'Yeah, it's like right in [the entrance hall], it's the weirdest thing in his whole house!'

It looks great though, doesn't it? 'Thank you. Yeah, I like it there. But it's so weird, because there's nothing else like that in his world, I love it! It's pretty trojan I think, having it in there.'

Can you tell us about the Saatchi story, please? I know it's been told dozens of times, but I think it's really interesting. I read that you smuggled a piece in there, but Martin told me you wrapped it up and had actually given it to the guy? 'No, no, no. [laughs] Basically what happened was, I really loved a lot of those YBA artists, because at the time I was at college and artists cut their ear off and died, according to most of the world. But there was Damian Hurst and Tracy Emin rocking these huge shows and getting paid and I was like, 'Oh my God, it's possible!' So, when I was about 17, I saw that Saatchi show and I saw all these things and I was like, 'Woah these things are actually really amazing, like, can art really

be this?' Because I didn't know and it changed things for me. 'Then, I guess it was a couple of years ago, Saatchi said, these artists are nothing but a footnote in history and then he flogs Damian Hurst's shark. Basically, he cashes the work in as if it's just anything, like it's not real and there's no spirit in it. It really pissed me off and I just found myself painting this piece and it said *British Painting Still Rocks* because he made this statement like British art wasn't important.

'He did this huge show of German artists and stuff like that and I don't have a problem with that, but I just felt angry and then the piece sort of had a resonance and it didn't seem to make sense, until it was in the context of where it came from. So, I wrapped it up in brown paper and went down to the gallery and I hadn't really formulated what I was going to do with it exactly. It's kind of weird, I wasn't really thinking – I get like that sometimes – when I'm just painting and I haven't really slept.

'I found myself there, bought my ticket, walked in, the security guard asked me to put my things in the cloakroom, I was like, 'Alright,' so I put my coat in and kept [the painting] under my arm and I walked round for a bit, for 10 or 15 minutes. I was looking at stuff and I was like, 'Wait, I'm totally in here with the painting, this just isn't right! Like, what the hell?!' And this is just after 9/11, I think or the tube bombs or something like that and I'm thinking, 'Bloody hell, this could be a bomb or anything. This is insane!'

'Anyway, I went to stick in on the wall and it wouldn't stick, it had sticky stuff on the back, but it didn't work. So I propped it on the mantle piece and thought, I think that makes my point. Then I left. And I wrote on the back that it's for Charles and it's a present and all that. I thought they'd give it to him and he'd make some sort of comment, when actually they thought it was some sort of news story. So they hung it on the wall, lit it and invited the press to take photos of it. Which was kind of cool and kind of not, it meant that they got to tell the story, which made it seem to be something it wasn't and it kind of trivialized it. It made it about me trying to get news stories, which it actually wasn't. It was just a genuine act of expressing something and I think that's kind of what got lost. Lost in it. So for me, as an artist's work I don't think it was that successful, because I don't think it conveyed exactly what I was trying to do.'

Sometimes you go and do something, then you get a different reaction back from what you expect or hope. You can always find something negative and positive in it. So, you did the piece with the remnants of the Momart pieces after the fire. Whose work did you collect and did you try to give it to the Tate, but they thought it wasn't appropriate? 'You've got to understand that I was obsessed with these things. In the same way a kid is obsessed with a pop star, I was absolutely obsessed. All I could think about were these works and then they burnt and they were chucking it in the bin. And I was like, 'What on earth is going on? This isn't right, these are important things.'

How did you find out that they were being thrown away? 'It was Uri, he was there. He drove past it and he said, 'Stuart, you're not going to believe what I've just seen. This is the most disgusting thing I've seen in my life. They're chucking it away.' I was mortified and I said, 'Well, we've got to get them. If you're there and you know about it, we have to do something about it. You can't just let it go.' Out of those works that happened in the '90s this is important stuff. You don't just chuck it in the bin. I don't care, you just don't. So it came into my possession like that. Then I had this really strange feeling... These were the things I was obsessed with. [I thought] 'Oh my God! Now I've got them, what [kind of] responsibility is this?' So, I started to create a new piece out of them and recontextualising them, which wasn't that odd, because all my work does that. It collects fragments from the news or popular culture and kind of remixes it.

'It became a sculpture. It's hard to say exactly what's in it, but I'm pretty sure there's a fragment of Tracy Emin's tent in there and some melted Damian Hurst bronzes and some other bits. At the time a lot of people were quite interested in the artwork, things were written about it and people were emailing in to offer us lots of money for it. I didn't feel like they were mine to sell anyway and there was some sort of insurance debate about who actually owns them, because the insurance company had paid out and all sorts of things like that. And I just felt like they needed to go somewhere where they'd be looked after. So we offered it to the Tate and they were really nice. and Nicholas Serota said 'Look, it's just too controversial.'



# STUART SEMPLE

INTERVIEW: SARAH J. EDWARDS  
ART: STUART SEMPLE

"I think a lot of people felt they wanted to let the dust settle on it. A lot of people didn't really know how to take it, it was genuinely really tragic for everyone involved because a lot of people lost work, so they didn't really want it. It was a shame really because that would have been the logical place for it to end up and be looked after."

You got quite a lot of press with regards to those two things, what sort of things do you think that has helped with, in terms of your career or maybe hindered?

"I think it's hindered more. Yeah, because of the way the press dealt with it, a lot of it was misconstrued. A lot of people in the art world were very upset by these things, because they're very serious issues to that community. It's not cool to be making statements on a lot of that stuff. There are certain people that you'd talk to who would be very cold. I mean, I had a show lined up with a really big gallery and they were like, 'Well actually Stuart, we don't know what the hell you're going to do next. You're like a loose canon, you're really dangerous, we can't do the show anymore.' I was really upset, because it was my childhood dream to do a show with these guys. And because of all of that, I lost it and it's been really difficult because of it. But then it raises the question, 'Should we not make work that we genuinely feel or just toe the line?' and I've never wanted to do that. I made it, just because I had to make it and you pay the price. [laughs] But it certainly hasn't helped."

You've been working for over eight years, how do you think your style has developed, I know that's a really broad question, but just thinking about what you thought you were going to do and where you are now? "I don't know, I think I got a whole load of stuff out, a lot of it I'm not that pleased with. I just feel now that I've got to the stage where I kind of know how to do some stuff, but I feel a bit trapped by it. My work has evolved, but it's sort of evolved into this set of rules and this system and I'm really desperate to kind of break it and have the huge massive leap of something new. But I think I've refined a lot of things I was doing, until they're second nature or I know I can do it. I've got a bit bored of it, if I'm completely honest. I think the early work, it was much more kind of reactive and a lot more gestural and immediate. What I was thinking on the day and a lot more personal narrative and I think over time it's developed to be much more of a reflection of an external kind of world rather than mine, you know? Probably become a bit less egoistic."

How do you feel about being called a 'Pop Artist', do you mind any kind of tags?

"I don't like being called a 'Pop Artist' because I feel like that's something that has been and gone. I deal with popular culture, that's my palette, but I'm not doing it in the way Warhol was doing it. They printed stuff, so it was all mechanised. It was very cold, it was non-emotive. If you take Warhol as the pinnacle of Pop Art. It was very cold, he said it was all about the surface, there's nothing else to it. I'm trying to take these things from popular culture and use it as a language, because we can all identify with it. We know what Britney Spears looks like, we might know the lyrics from a Radiohead song, so we've all got something in common. But I think you can mix that stuff up to make something much more emotional and a lot more personal. I think that's more than Pop Art, I don't know what it's called. I don't think it needs a name, you know? It's just painting."

"There's this whole thing coming out... Like in America, they've just done this huge thing and it's 'Dark Pop'. They've got this whole idea that people are remixing popular culture like this, with more sinister undertones. They're using me as an example, amongst some other people as 'Dark Pop' and saying this is the future of pop art. But I don't really think it fits."

Can you talk about the methods of your work, because it's mainly acrylic, pencil and markers, isn't it?

"And some spray paint sometimes and a lot of charcoal. Mustn't forget the charcoal, that's important. Methods are... I collect images, kind of like samples, so, I'll go to Borders and I'll buy a drink and I'll sit with a huge piles of magazines and my camera and I'll just photograph them."

[I'm gob-smacked] Urrr! Don't. Tell. Me. That! "I'm sure you've been mixed in at some stage, you must've been. I just have this opinion that if popular culture is there to make us consume something, then, we've got fair dibs to remix it."

I can see that. "I kind of select things and I catalogue them on a removable hard drive. I've been doing that for eight years now. There are some images on there that are really old. Maybe I hear a song or I'll feel something, so I'll write it down. Then I start to drag those elements into a composition on my computer. Some of those take a couple of years, until I'm happy with it and some of them, I'll delete and change. Then, when it's done I'll use it as a basis for a painting. After that, I'll start to turn it into paint. And then it changes quite a lot. Maybe at the point

when I start painting, it's about 60-70% there. "So there is plenty of room for it to evolve on the day. What I'm listening to, what's going on. Then, I kind of live with them for quite a while and I tend to only have three or four on the go. Maybe they'll sit there for six months. That one [points to painting] has probably been there for about three months. I still don't feel it's finished, but I don't know what's wrong with it. Sometimes, I'll just put it in storage and no one will see it."

You're like a music producer. "Yeah, totally! Really like it. Especially the way they drag things around on the computer and cut them up. I've got this obsession with sort of performing paintings. So, it's like, I've written the composition, to use the music [as a metaphor] and then I walk in front of it, then I'm performing it. I never allow myself to erase anything, because it's like a live take - that I was here and this is what I did. That's why sometimes bits will look a bit sloppy or they look a bit wrong. I think there's a real honesty in that. I think you see much more of someone's personality in the imperfections, than all these perfectly rendered things. Otherwise, I'd just print it like a Pop Artist did."

I know you've spoken about brand names and the importance they play now. You referenced it in your Dior drawing, didn't you? Do you think they play a real role in people's status' and aspirations. "Yeah, they do. The way I look at it is, we're kind of defined by the brands we consume. They're almost like our DNA. One person might be made up of Modular Records, Red Bull, London Underground and something from American Apparel and some cool thing from Kokon to Za. And that's them and then another person might be like, Topshop but pointy shoes only, a Dolcé & Gabbana hat that they inherited, a couple of pictures on their wall from the Tate and that's kind of like their make up and how they present! What's quite interesting I think, that is once they start consuming those brands they're almost building a wall around themselves. Like, this is who I am, this is who I'm not. I think that's quite interesting, how they trickle into identity and how we present ourselves. Like, how we're supposed to consume them, but once we've consumed them, we're left unfulfilled. I think it's quite interesting, people's individual relationship to brands."

Can you tell us about the two paintings shown here? First, *No Direction Home*

"I made that about two years ago and the bizarre thing is most of my pictures pretty much sell when I paint them. But that one, just hovered! No one wanted it, I was like, 'Are you mad! That's the best thing I've made for ages!' Most of them, yeah, they're alright, but that I was obsessed with! I was like, 'What, do people not see it?' But, at this point, I was incredibly lonely. I was spending a lot of time on my own just painting and drawing and I'd got somewhere, where I'd dreamt of being. I was an artist now and people bought my work. That's fine, I can pay my rent with it and I can spend my time doing it, but where does it go? This *No Direction Home* idea [is about] that actually I can't relate to anyone else who's doing this thing and I felt very, very isolated."

"I didn't know where it would end up and I didn't really know what my next painting would be. I just felt kind of lost. I don't know, I just painted that and it's a self portrait. It's probably the first self portrait I did. I just felt at my lowest. The lowest I'd felt for years when I made that. I just had to get it out. You know when things don't really make sense and you just feel really isolated, and you don't really know where you're going to go. 'I don't know where to go next!' I thought, 'This is it, I've got here and now what? Do I just keep making these painting again and again? Or do I just stop making paintings and everyone's going to hassle me? Or do I just chuck my fame in the canal and go home, but I don't know really have one. My parents' house isn't my home. Is this my home? Well, not really, 'cause this is just constructed to make these pictures for everyone else.'"

*Hollow* "Yeah, that's interesting, 'cause I'd seen this whole thing, with Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami and Ken (Ju\$ Another Rich Kid - see *BLAG Vol. 2 No9*) all this gold stuff and I really liked that. Now this is the thing about Warhol, he did this Gold Marilyn Monroe and Jeff Koons had done these photo-realistic paintings and I felt really let down by them when I went to see them. You've got like sixty people, painting 24 hours a day and I'd been wanting to see these paintings for a year and half. So, I'm standing in front of them and thought, 'That's what you do! That's a joke!' And I like the idea that people sign cheques Mickey Mouse and I thought, the *creme-de-la-creme* of Warhol's thing is the Gold Marilyn. I liked this idea of making a gold Mickey. I thought it's really subversive, it's like, completely taking the piss out of it all and then saying it's completely hollow. That's kind of what I was saying. That's it, it's quite a simple one, it's kind of subversive in a way."

