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Palladium



Patrick Grant

From Edinburgh schoolboy to Savile Row sophisticate. Has Norton & Sons' Mr Grant finally found his niche?



Helsinki: Europe's Silicon Valley—Doing it by the book at the London Library—This winter's hottest accessories—Stuart Semple: keeping the Brit art flag flying—The greatest opera houses of the 21st century—City slicker: the very best of London suiting—The unholy trinity: Hollywood, politics and religion



Pop art

Stuart Semple

The rise of the artist who said RIP YBA

By *Catherine Wheatley*

At just 28, Stuart Semple is one of the hottest contemporary British artists around. He famously created the memorial artwork RIP YBA with debris collected from the Momart Warehouse fire in 2005. His paintings have been bought by Debbie Harry, Johnny Depp and Boy George. Cult of Denim, his recent creative collaboration with Selfridges timed to coincide

with the Frieze Art Fair in October 2008, was the talk of London.

Semple's work fuses 1980s influences with a pop sensibility that embraces advertising, film, music and celebrity. Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Thom Yorke, Hunter S Thompson and Madonna are just some of his inspirations. Two of his characteristic images, Kurt Lied, his homage to the Nirvana frontman, and Britney Nuked My Pooch, featuring a demonic pop princess, are acrylic collages of words and images in a palette he describes as ray-gun red, pretty-boy pink, gunge green and orange-ade. These days his output extends beyond painting to embrace silk-screens, T shirts and album covers. "Pop Art shows the glossy surface – it celebrated popular culture – but I want to peel that back," he

Pray
Mixed media on canvas
75 x 75 x 5cm

says. "My work is more about my own emotional response to some of these objects. It's also about nostalgia. I want my art to make people feel the same way that Cyndi Lauper made me feel back in the Eighties."

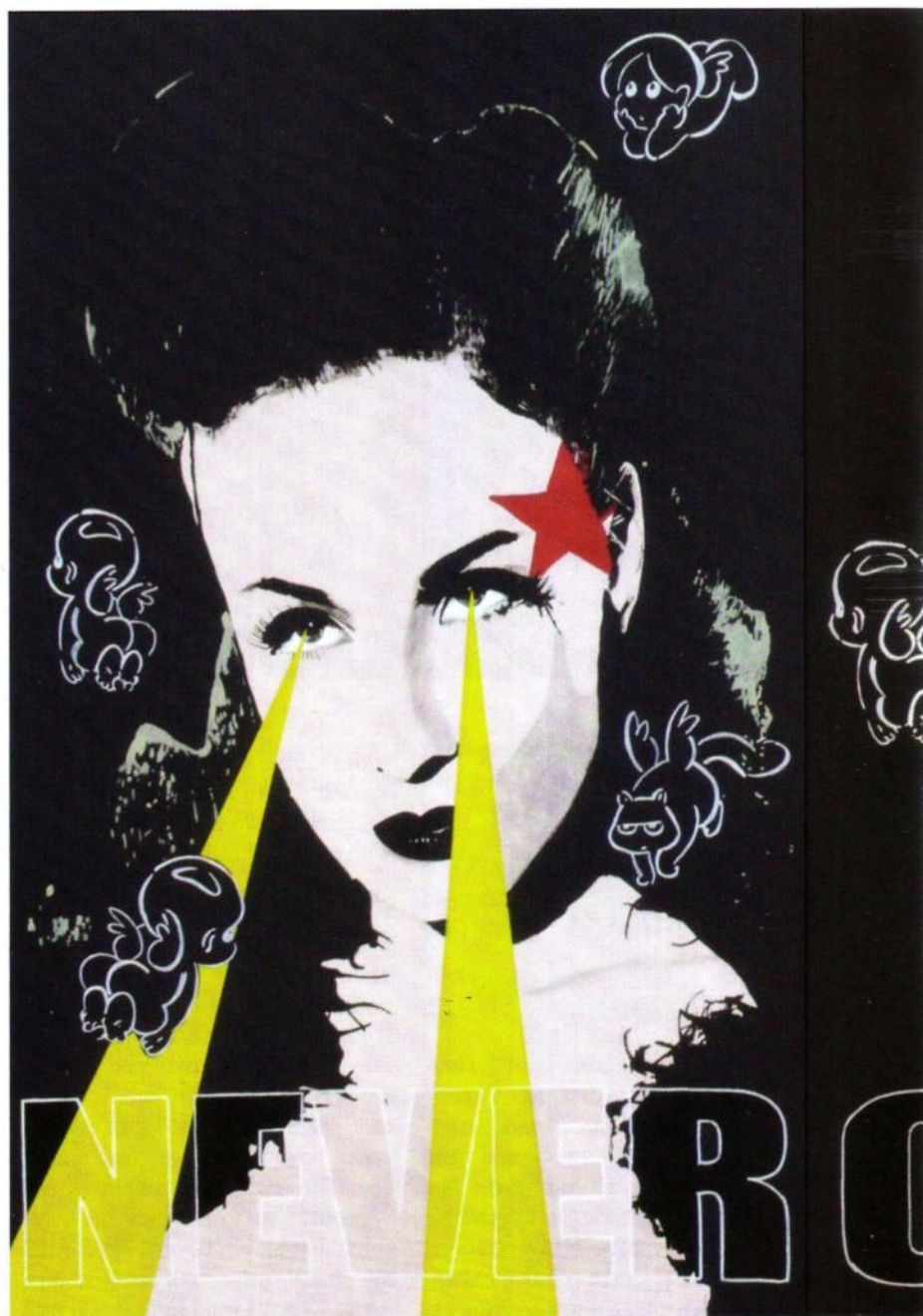
Semple had what he describes as a hard childhood in Bournemouth and Lincolnshire. He grew up against the backdrop of Thatcherism and a burgeoning consumer culture, where he observed that as society became more fragmented, individuals began to cling on to pop culture in order to feel connected. "In the 1980s, with the advent of music videos, popular culture became an escape," he says. "I have a childish perspective on it all. I celebrated it and loved it – but secretly, because my parents hated it all."

At 19 he experienced an extreme peanut allergy that almost claimed his life. The experience gave him the motivation to dedicate himself to art. When he emerged from hospital, he took on the persona of 'Nancyboy', producing over 3,000 paintings in less than two years. "I needed to sell my work to make money so I did three pictures a day and sold them on eBay," he recalls. "It was an experimental time, fun, jokey, a stream of consciousness. I believed in them but they don't feel like they are mine anymore." One of his works from that period, *Horse Ruslin'*, which depicts a pink and frankly puzzled-looking nag with a flying saucer, is currently for sale on eBay with a price tag of \$1,750.

Semple staged his first London show in 2001, but it was RIP YBA, his homage to Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Gary Hume and the other Young British Artists whose work had been destroyed in the 2004 Momart warehouse fire, that catapulted him to fame. Semple took debris collected by Uri Geller – said to include fragments of Tracey Emin's infamous *Everyone I Ever Slept With* tent – and packaged it into eight plastic boxes entitled *Burn Baby Burn*. Each box bore slogans in pink lettering, including RIP YBA. Semple offered his work to the Tate but it was declined as being too controversial.

The following year Semple hit the headlines again when he dodged security at the Saatchi Gallery to hang one of his own pink, glittery paintings, bearing the slogan 'British Painting Still+Rocks', in a gap on the wall. The gesture was a re-

Never Come Down
Mixed media on canvas
550 x 300 x 20cm







Kurt Lied
Mixed media on canvas
550 x 300 x 20cm

sponse to Charles Saatchi's comment that Young British Artists would amount to nothing more than "a footnote in history". Tellingly, the painting stayed undetected throughout the exhibition and an American collector was subsequently rumoured to have offered £50,000 for it.

Semple is no fan of Margaret Thatcher's former advertising guru, whose patronage transformed struggling YBAs like Damien Hirst into wealthy household names. Saatchi has turned his attention away from British art; now the Saatchi Gallery is showing work by Chinese artists. "He served a purpose in the Nineties but he's not the leader or barometer of the market that he was."

Today, having dumped the Nancyboy persona, Semple is in his busy Shoreditch studio working on paintings for a new exhibition next year. His work has taken on a darker edge; a reflection, perhaps, of how an increasingly cash-strapped society is falling out of love with brands and brash consumerism.

"It's informed by loneliness and isolation within mass culture," he says. "I've felt increasingly disinterested in Pop. It's big and I'm small. We believe these constructed images describe our culture but they don't. When everything looks perfect there is still suffering underneath."

His new work features large canvases and images that consist of thousands of

tiny hand-painted dots. "I like to work early and late, when it's dark outside and there are no distractions. And I absolutely have to have music. The mark-making itself has to be emotive so I change my mood with music. I might have 20 seconds of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture and then a bust of wailing EMO stuff." What motivates him, he says, is the technical challenge of producing bigger, better, more complex work.

Semple has also been working on a collaboration with indie rockers the Subliminal Girls. Reacting to how album covers have been reduced to a patch on an iPod, he has created ten copies of limited-edition artwork, including a silk-screened T shirt, a flick-book that simulates a music video and a fold-out print, around a 10" disc. "Other bands might be trying to sell a million downloads for pence, but we want music to be seen as something of value," he explains.

As investors and collectors feel the financial pinch, Semple sees challenging times ahead for contemporary artists like himself. "I'm sensing that people are buying less art, and in a way that's a positive thing. People are no longer buying things for the hype but because it's quality work. It's empowering because it will take a lot of the clutter away."

Stuart Semple will surely be among those left standing.

The Cult of Denim

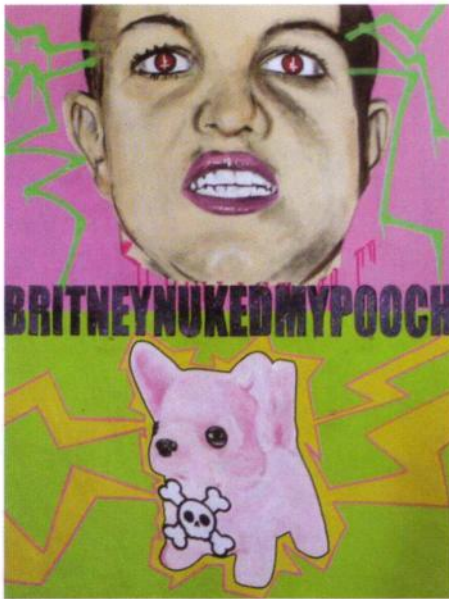
Denim long ago left behind its humble origins as work-wear, but Stuart Semple has taken its elevation further by teaming up with major fashion brands to produce a collection of limited-edition jeans that straddles fashion and art.

Semple has bleached, painted and embellished jeans by men's and women's labels including Diesel, Levi's and 7 for all Mankind as part of the Selfridges Cult of Denim exhibition. This is not his first foray into fashion: he also created a collection of hoodies featuring Edie Sedgwick, Allan Ginsberg, Syd Barrett and other sixties icons under the Rebels and Devils label.

"I'm interested in the mundane things in pop culture that people overlook. Behind fashion, everyone has a pair of jeans and I wanted to put them in the spotlight again," he says. "I love the way that jeans change as we change – whether they represent hippies, work-wear or high fashion."

He has also created artworks on huge denim canvases that include key motifs and images representing each brand's identity. "I really liked Diesel's advertising images of drowning, altars and worshipping strange images. They are like what I might paint anyway." [Ⓟ]

www.stuartsemples.com



Left:
Britney Nuked My Pooch
Mixed media on canvas
120 x 90 x 7cm

Below:
Promotion for The Cult of Denim



Images: Stuart Semple, courtesy of Stuart Semple Industries