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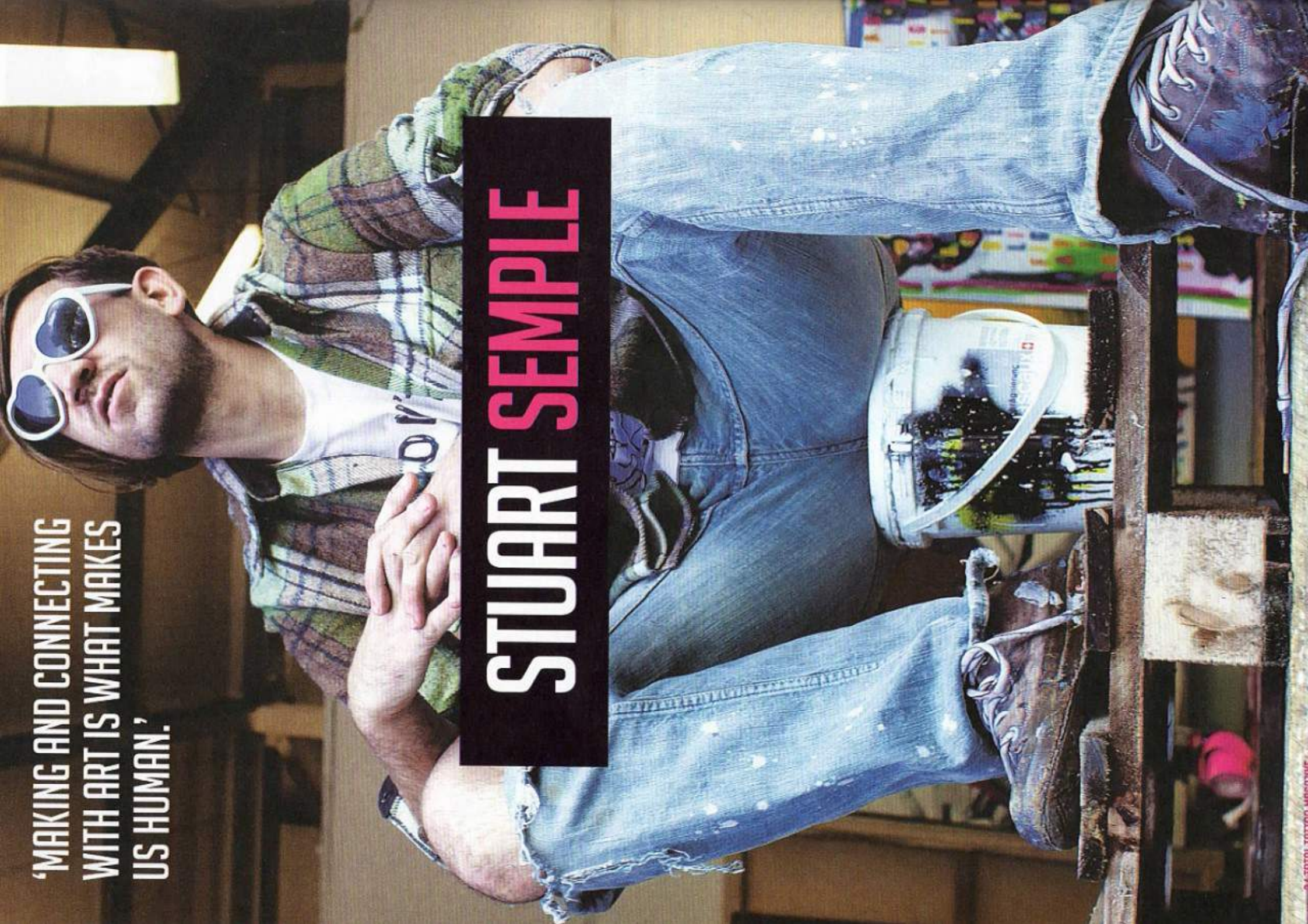
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‘MAKING AND CONNECTING
WITH ART IS WHAT MAKES
US HUMAN.’

STUART SEMPLE



Stuart Semple is a young multidisciplinary British artist whose vibrant creations, socially-engaged approach and generous personality are overturning the conventions of the art establishment. We were thrilled to meet him and have the opportunity of presenting his work here in the pages of Total Tattoo.

Have you always loved art?

Yes, right from when I was little kid. But at first it was a bit of a secret passion. Growing up in a working-class home in the 80s, kids like me didn't really have access to art. It came into my life as music videos and album covers. I was in love with music – bands like Nirvana, R.E.M. and later, Placebo and Radiohead.

When did you first visit an art gallery?

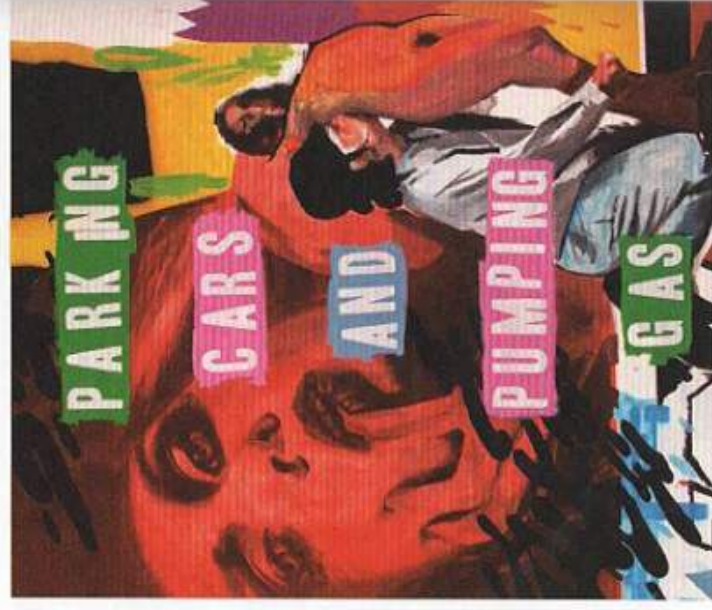
When I was eight my mum took me to London to visit the National Gallery and I saw a Van Gogh. From that moment on, I was obsessed with colour and paint. All I wanted to be was an artist.

Did you study art at college?

I finally went to art school when I was a teenager, but I had a very frightening near-death experience that ultimately led to me leaving the course.

'WE CAN'T REALLY MAKE ANYTHING NEW, JUST NEW COMBINATIONS OF THINGS.'





'ART IS A WAY TO SHARE HOW WE FEEL.'



Were you able to continue your studies?

After I left college, I lived next door to a Borders bookshop. I made a point of going there every morning to work my way through the reading list from my degree. Over a period of three years, I read the entire art, marketing and spirituality sections in the bookshop. I also scanned all the magazines, and that's when I started to find my obsession with mass culture and my love of images. I was passionate about art history, printmaking and life drawing at college, and I threw myself into that all day every day even after I left.

So you were still making art?

Yes. My near-death experience left me with a major anxiety disorder, and I started using art as a way to cope. Every afternoon I would make at least three pieces, often painting late into the night. And every day I put three pictures on eBay, not really to make money (although I did need to eat) but more as a way of getting these weird feelings out. By the time I was 21, I had made and sold over 3,000 works of art.



What was the response on eBay?

Uri Geller saw my work and bought some pieces from me, and then he introduced me to Debbie Harry from Blondie, who also bought some work. Then I started to get offers of exhibitions from galleries around the world. So I was doing all these commercial shows, but I still wanted to carry on connecting to the grassroots audience via eBay. To this day, I still put something up every night and start the bidding at £1.

Your work incorporates many different disciplines.

Do you have a favourite?

All the different disciplines have their own attributes that I love and hate – their own freedoms and restrictions. It all depends on the idea. I love working with film as it's very free. I find painting the most frustrating, but also the most challenging and alluring. It's almost addictive. It always pulls me back. It's through sculpture and installation work that I find it easiest to convey an experience, but they can sometimes lack the emotionality and intimacy of paint. It depends what I'm working on really.

What determines your creative direction on any given day?

I pretty much just follow the thread of the work from the day before. But life happens, and something will move me or inspire me, and then I will feel I need to respond to it creatively in some way, to help me make sense of it. I do collaborate with others too. I really like that process. So sometimes it's the person I'm collaborating with who will determine the timeline of a project.



Your work straddles the worlds of physical and digital art...

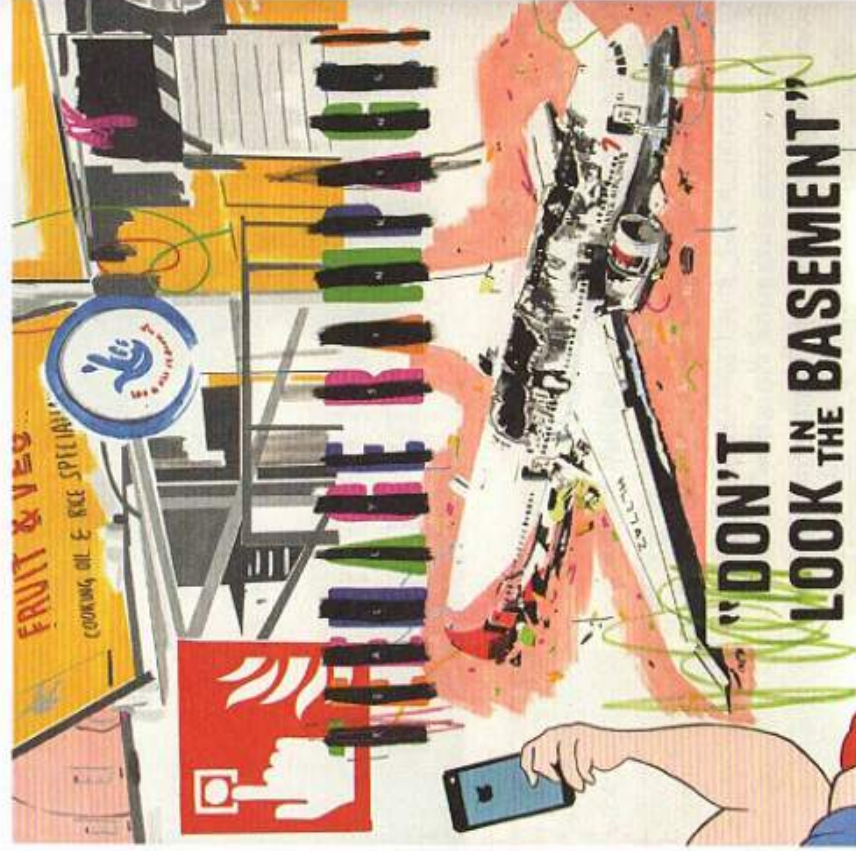
I think we all live two lives, a digitally connected one and a physical one. I like to make work for both spaces. Film can live in a gallery or on the web; it's the same for any image. I love the online space because it's inclusive and accessible to almost anyone. The audience is vast. And I love the freedom to share ideas globally. So few people can make it to a gallery in a fixed location; many more can access a website. Art should be for everyone, so it makes sense to have it where everyone is! Today that's TikTok. Next year it'll be somewhere else.

Are you concerned about your work being copied or replicated?

I like things being accessible, and I love dialogue and discussion, so sharing ideas through channels such as my podcast is really important to me. I've had so much work of mine replicated! Normally I'm flattered. I believe in remixing and in hybridity. I don't think we can really make anything new, but I do think we can make new combinations of things. So I have no problem with people using my work in their work. I don't like it when they take my work without asking and pretend it's theirs though.

Tell us about the connections you see between art and science.

I've never understood this supposed opposition of art and science. I see science as something that's really creative, almost artistic. Science is an art. And in the old days all artists were scientists! They would make their own paints. They knew the chemistry of pigments. They studied the stars and the body. They were alchemists.



'I LOVE THE ONLINE SPACE BECAUSE IT'S SO INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE.'

One of your newest pieces, LOVETONE, looks at colour in depth. Can you explain the idea behind the piece?

I'm really interested in colour. Computer screens can show 16+ million colours. I wanted to know what it would look like if I saw all of them at the same time. So I wrote a bit of computer code to generate the individual unique colours, then the computer randomly plotted them on a grid. From a distance, LOVETONE just looks like a grey square, but close-up it's like a universe of colour.

Tell us about Culture Hustle.

Really the idea is that my studio makes its own paint. I have always made my own paints, mainly because I couldn't afford the ones in the shops, but also because I wanted much stronger and more potent colours than you could ordinarily buy. Originally the paint was for me to use, but now we share it with the world. It's the same studio assistants helping to make the paint who are working on my shows, and sculptures and stuff. In a way, we see the paints as another artwork that the studio makes. I don't see Culture Hustle as a brand; it's just the name of our art materials project and the website.

So it's very collaborative?

Yes, that aspect of it is amazing. All the artists who use our products are involved in testing paints and suggesting what we make next. It's a lovely thing. We also have to collaborate with laboratories that offer specific facilities and skills. The science of what we're doing varies according to the paint we're making; the brightest white works completely differently to the liquid mirror for example. We experiment a lot, and it's fun.



And it's a top quality product!

At heart, when it comes down to it, it's just paint making - with good pigments, great binders and various added ingredients (which is where the evolution happens). Often just by being generous, and less greedy, you can make a better quality paint than anyone else. Using the best ingredients can make a massive difference.



You had a very public falling out with artist Anish Kapoor over Vantablack*, a high-tech super-black coating material. It's been described in a press quote on your Wikipedia page as "two grown men fighting over who gets to use the pretty colours..." Can you tell us your side of the story?

Well, for those who don't know, Anish Kapoor struck an exclusive deal with the creators of Vantablack which means, in effect, that no other visual artist can use the product. As I see it, it was his wealth that enabled him to do this, and to me that felt very unfair. So as a joke I put out my pinkest pink paint on the internet and shared it for what it cost me to make. The only catch was that in order to use it you had to declare that you weren't Anish Kapoor or associated with him. But Anish Kapoor got hold of some of it and posted a rather rude [but amazing] picture of it on his Instagram...

* Vantablack is the brand name for a range of coatings produced by Surrey Nanosystems, with applications in many areas of science and engineering including deep-space imaging, automotive sensing and optical systems. These super-black materials reflect so little light they are almost impossible to 'see' in the normal way; the human eye often tries to make sense of a Vantablack surface by interpreting it as a 'hole'.

Vantablack S-VIS, the material in question here, is said to be the world's blackest commercially available coating. It's a sophisticated type of 'spray paint' especially suited to complex 3D objects, requiring a special application process in order to achieve its full 'black' effect.

The following is an extract from the Surrey Nanosystems website, under the heading "Can I use Vantablack in Art?"

"Vantablack is generally not suitable for use in art due to the way in which it's made. Vantablack S-VIS also requires specialist application to achieve its aesthetic effect. In addition, the coating's performance beyond the visible spectrum results in it being classified as a dual-use material [ie with both civil and military applications] that is subject to UK Export Control. We have therefore chosen to license Vantablack S-VIS exclusively to Kapoor Studios UK to explore its use in works of art. This exclusive licence limits the coating's use in the field of art, but does not extend to any other sectors."

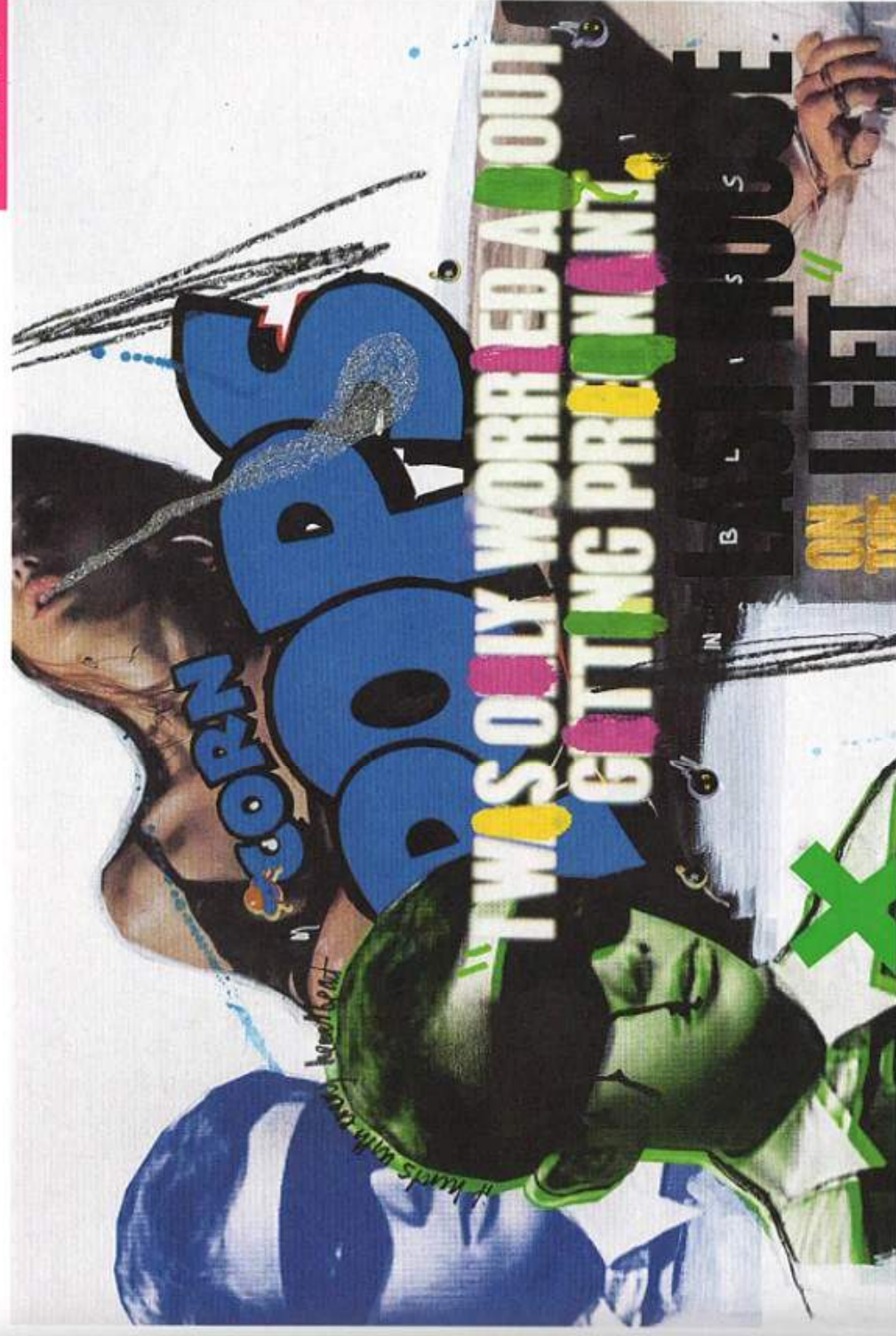
www.surreynanosystems.com

LOVETONE®
16777216
Stuart Semple Color

200%

1200%

COLOR SHIFT INK



How did you respond?

With the help of a crowdfunding campaign, I produced my own super-blacks – Black 2.0 and Black 3.0 – which any artist can use safely and affordably. I then went on to share several other materials that my studio makes, all of which do weird and wonderful things!

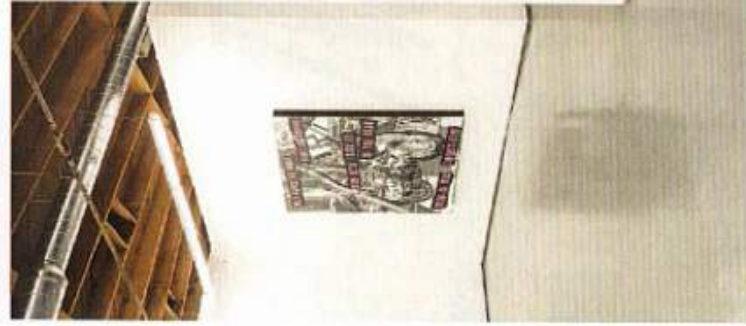
Have you ever thought about creating tattoo ink?

I get asked about this almost every day. But I wouldn't know where to start. I'd be a total beginner in that space. Sadly I don't know enough about the biology of the body. I rely on so many different materials to make colours this potent, there's no way they would be safe as tattoo inks. And there are so many brilliant tattoo ink brands out there, I don't think I could add anything to what they're already doing. I know a lot of tattoo artists love to use my paints in their other creative work though, which is brilliant.

Your art is often layered and collaged, which resonates very much with current avant garde of tattooing. Has anyone ever tattooed your art onto their body?

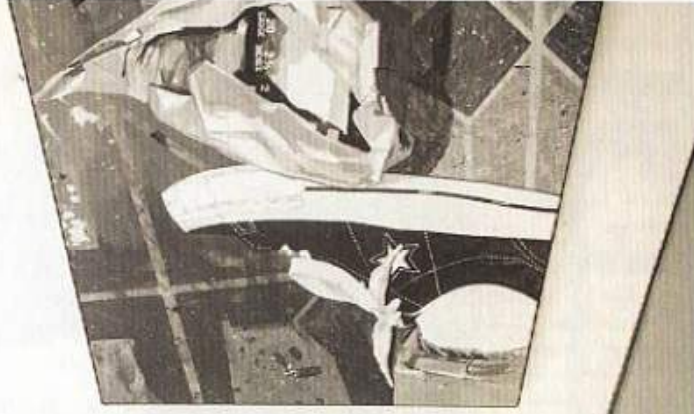
Yes they have. I've seen quite a few tattoos of my work. But normally it's not so much the layered collaged stuff. More often it's the squished smiley motif – which has kind of taken on a life of its own as a symbol of resilience and inner strength for some people.

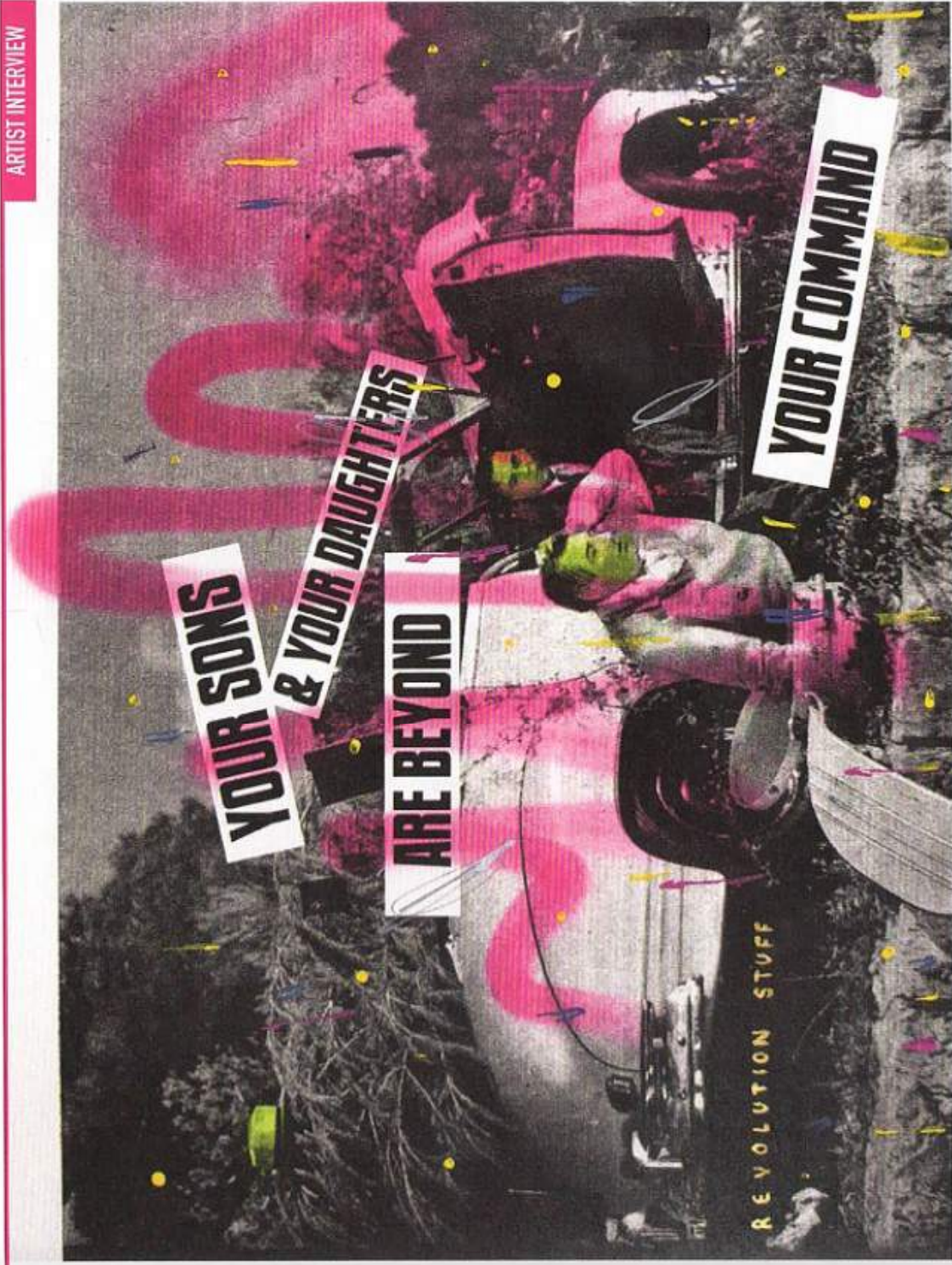




Last Black Friday you decided to create #buybackfriday. What was that about?

It was a relatively simple idea. I find Black Friday a bit gross, with everyone clambering to buy stuff, so I decided to try something else. I asked artists to share their work online, with a price – and then we bought pieces for the studio. Nothing was expensive, and we got some really cool work to look at and appreciate – nearly 300 pieces in all. And a lovely unexpected thing happened. A lot of artists ended up buying each other's work too. The whole thing was brilliant. If we need to go on a shopping spree, let's make it one where we support individual artists rather than the big corporates.





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Sarah Stroup

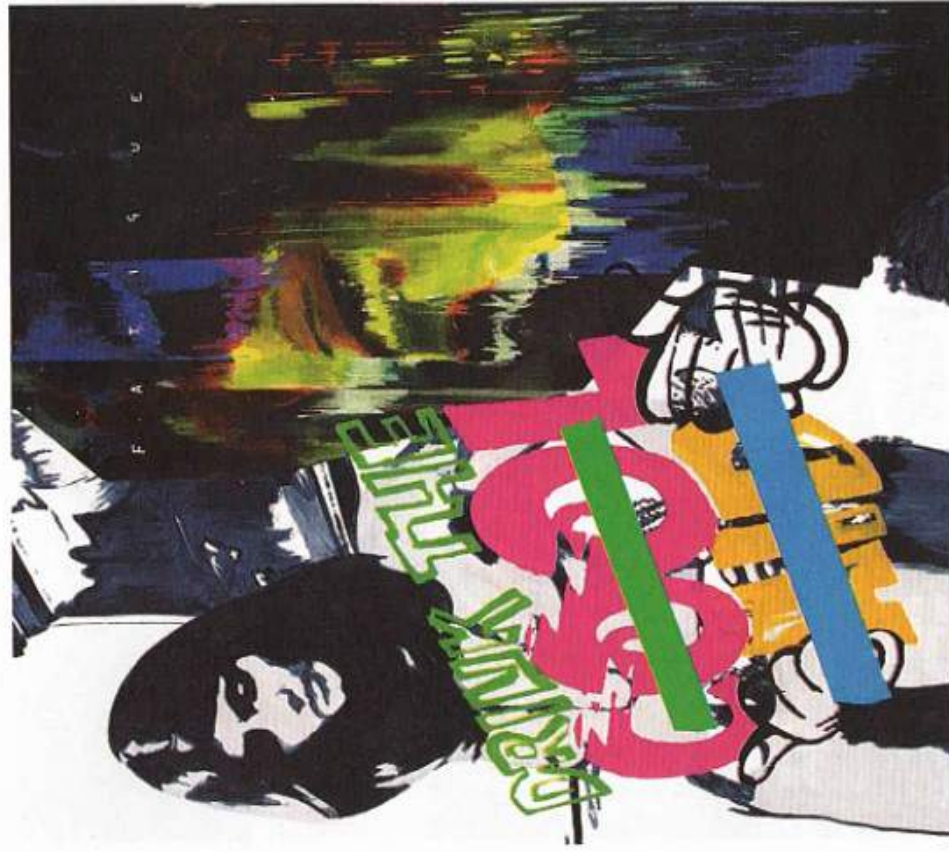
Do you find the current global situation (pandemic, wars, environmental and economic crises...) is influencing your work in any identifiable way?

I'm not sure if the current situation is feeding into my new work. I've actually spent the last couple of years working on a series of paintings about masculinity, but no doubt the atmosphere of the times we are in will feed in somehow. It's weird, because whenever I look back at work from a few years ago I always seem to see something of what was going on in the world, even if I didn't notice it at the time.

Can art help the world heal?

I don't think art can save the world, nor should that burden fall on artists. But we can help connect people, and we can hold up a mirror to reflect the times we are in, so that people don't feel emotionally alone. We can give hope.





How does art do this? Why is art important?

Art does so many things. At its best, it reminds us of where we've been, and it teaches us something. It can give us experiences that we wouldn't ordinarily have. It's important because it's the way humans express themselves. It's how we record history and it's the way we can share with others how we feel. Making and connecting with art is what makes us human.

In addition to making art, you've presented TV shows, and you've written for magazines and newspapers all over the world. Does your confidence ever waver?

Luckily I've never experienced imposter syndrome! I like taking risks and trying new things. Even if I'm rubbish at something, I don't let that put me off doing it. I learn a lot like that, even though the price is often failure. In terms of my mental health, I've struggled massively since my near-death experience with crippling anxiety and panic attacks. It's been a lot better in the last couple of years, but it always feels strange to me that someone as anxious as me would take so many risks in their work!

[@stuartsemple](https://www.instagram.com/stuartsemple)
[stuartsemple.com](https://www.stuartsemple.com)
[culturehustle.com](https://www.culturehustle.com)

We warmly invite Anish Kapoor to send us a statement in response to Stuart's comments.