

ART

Gavin Turk

by Justin Hopper May 09, 2013

Gavin Turk on impersonating Elvis, Ford transit vans, and the problems of careful consumption.



Gavin Turk. *Nomad*, 2003. Painted bronze, 42×169 x 105 cm. All images courtesy of Gavin Turk and © Live Stock Market.

The neighborhood around Gavin Turk's East London studio is exactly what naysayers said the 2012 Olympics would bring. In the shadow of the still-resonating stadium, this semi-circular road is littered with barbed wire and discarded McDonald's wrappers; empty warehouses and the cold, sign-less facades that seem more like a '70s J.G. Ballard paperback cover than 2013 London.

Such juxtapositions are manna to Turk, one of the original "YBAs" ("Young British Artists") who came to dominate Brit-art in the 1990s. In a career spanning more than 20 years, a fact commemorated in his new monograph, *The Years*, and current show at Ben Brown Fine Arts in London, Turk has created an entire language for questioning authenticity and preconception. Placing his own likeness at the heart of iconic images such as Andy Warhol's silk screens (of Elvis, Sid Vicious, and others), Turk twists and shucks at the layers of seeing we live with in today's age of image ubiquity. And perhaps more importantly, through a process of creating and then painting bronzes, Gavin Turk builds high-art sculptures that act as "fake" readymades, calling into question every assumption we have about viewing objects—from McDonald's wrappers, to the glittering stadiums that tower above them.

JUSTIN HOPPER One of the themes you've worked with recently is the idea of the

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automobile. In your recent show at David Nolan Gallery, the work was all about cars: A sculpture of an exhaust pipe, precisely made to look like a readymade; images of car exhaust plumes; and work continuing use of the English cultural phenomenon of the 'white van.'

GAVIN TURK The automobile is an extension of a person. If at some point our architecture starts to talk about interior/exterior buildings—places that we use for habitats—they're then interconnected with road systems. [Those] road systems then have machines on them, which are kind of these "human machines." And what I want to do is try to go to the end of the vehicle—when vehicles are finished, but also when the exhaust combustion is finished. The exhaust pipe [piece] is a metaphor for the general exhaustion and the end of something. When an old exhaust pipe has a hole in it, when it becomes no good, people try to discard them on the side of the street, they really become these useless things.

Simultaneously, I look at this thing and think, Here's a pipe, a transportation system, it's a place where something goes from one place to another, in that way it's a metaphor for the automobile. It has to do with breathing; it has to do with lungs; it has to do with inside and outside. It has to do with this transfer. It puts me in mind of the way that air from the outside world gets into your lungs and enters into your body and your bloodstream. So, actually, the oxygen in the air gets extracted out of the air and somehow is in your body. At some point your body . . . there's no true "inside."



Gavin Turk. ID, 2013. C-type print, 1720×1200 mm.

JH And how does that thought process—thinking about the exhaust pipe, and therefore the automobile, as kith and kin of the human being—transform into an art process?

GT It starts really with the pipe itself. I find this thing, and I want to almost be able to objectify it, to 'art-ify' it—to make artifice of it. I take the exhaust pipe and put it through a process of casting, molding, changing, transforming it into wax, burning the wax out, leaving a hole in the wax with another form of metal, which is

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bronze which is like, you've got the Bronze Age and then you've got the Iron Age, so it's almost like taking it back in time. It's this fire process, using a combusting process—a breaking down of material, transforming of material and then changing into bronze and literally painting it with oil paints to make it look identical to an exhaust pipe that we cast. What you end up with is this *trompe l'oeil* exhaust pipe. And then I reposition these exhaust pipes in steel and glass cases in this "museum-ified" world where they're being preserved, kept away from the audience, unable to be touched. They've become untouchable, fossilized in an intellectual sense.

JH You've done many pieces of this sort—a highly processed bronze sculpture formed and painted to look like a readymade. The readymade concept takes an everyday object and does this by making it "museum-ified," so to speak; in this case, what changes about how we look at it when you create an object like this?

GT We get to see it as a readymade, and then we get to see it as a made object. The fact that it's in a cabinet means you don't get to touch it, you don't get to properly interfere with it, you just get to look at it. You would assume that it's the real object. You have to almost take for granted that someone might tell you that it's actually a painted object, it's a *trompe l'oeil*. Then you have to acknowledge that you're not able to actually see what you think that you're looking at. So already you're sort of going, Okay, I assumed this was an exhaust pipe, now you're telling me it's not an exhaust pipe, it's something that looks like an exhaust pipe, but it's an art object. So, when I thought it was an exhaust pipe . . . is it still an exhaust pipe? I'm trying to engender the idea that all those preconceptions, all those useful bits of stereotyping, all those thoughts that you might have in the process of looking at something, might actually be subject to something else. They might not be as straightforward as you thought they were, so there's a possibility that you might be able to look at it in a different way; to see it in a different way. It's like trying to produce things that breed alternatives and allow you to investigate the object through a set of things that are wrong, things that are not what you thought.

JH Forgetting that first use of the word *exhaust*, and thinking about exhausted, finished objects: So many of these sculptures you've done, the apple cores, for example, or the [series of] fish and chips packaging, are about roadside objects, but also more generally recreating objects that are exhausted; whose use has been filled, so to speak. Can you talk briefly about why that in particular interests you?

GT Well, I suppose it's again, this idea of *the other*. It's something that you throw away. It's what you edit out, what you don't use, that can tell you as much about yourself as what you do use, as what you keep, as what you choose to edit in. It's just two sides of the same bit of paper. If you cut a piece of paper in a wiggly way and you throw one half in the bin, if you pull that half out of the bin and open it up you can work out what the other half looked like, more or less. It's a kind of contemporary archaeology, it's like saying, "With these things that I literally found on the road, I'm able to reconstruct and get a picture of our culture, of how we live—of the space between people." It's like recreating the pavement; the possibility of recreating the stage upon which we all have lived our lives. Sometimes if you're taught drawing you get taught to paint between the objects, paint the negative space or whatever it is.

There's also a comment on consumer culture, the idea of the responsibility at the moment seems to lie in the responsibility of careful consumption—of buying the right product. But somehow less so is this idea of what do you do when that product is done. You've already done it—your responsibility has been just buying the right thing. What do you do when you've got to get rid of the rest of it, when you've exhausted the thing?

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Gavin Turk. *Cod and Chips to Take Away*, 2008. Painted bronze, 4×21 x 31.5 cm. Photograph by Stephen White

JH It's a sort of an easy way out of late capitalism, just to answer it with more late capitalism—what you need to do to fix these things that have gone wrong from capitalism is to buy more stuff.

GT That is unfortunately frequently the answer when there's a problem. The way out of the problem is to increase the economy—for everyone to go out and buy more. We haven't quite figured out a way—consumerist culture hasn't figured out a way—of not doing that. Of doing something else, doing something different.

JH it seems to me that many of those sculptures also imply this, I can't think of a better phrase than *hidden in plain sight*. I know there is a better one—

GT Elephant in the room.

JH Yeah, like *Nomad*.

GT When *Nomad* was first shown, it was outside a gallery, on the road. It was really strange because obviously then it was functioning on so many different levels. It was functioning as someone sleeping in a sleeping bag on the street, which was something I realized that people didn't want to see because if they noticed the person sleeping in a sleeping bag on the street they were somehow making it real, they were giving reality and form to this person's existence on the street. But that was married up against the fact that they also—basically they'd be implicated by noticing the guy on the street and they'd be somehow responsible for putting him on the street. So if they see him on the street, they might feel conscious of the fact that they weren't living on the street, but that was married to the fact that they go into the newsagents and buy a copy of *Hello Magazine* which basically is this reductive insight into the way people live and peoples' lifestyles, and people's personal space. And so there's a human interest in people's private lives and people's personal space, and so actually the guy in his sleeping bag is

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incredibly interesting to look at, it's almost like you do want to look at it because that's peoples' private lives, that's his whole life in a way, that's his home; his snail shell.

And we haven't even got to the sculpture there, we're still on the outside of it thinking about the desire to look at something, and making something which people don't want to know is there. There's this kind of curious, strange eye contact with this object. And then obviously there's the object, which is obviously (*laughter*) a really expensive, elaborate piece of construction. It's a sort of, actually a rather expensive high-end art object lying on the street, which is weird! Why would you put a really expensive high-end art object on the street? And it was a very interesting kind of tension between art, its audience, its non-audience, the art being in the wrong place, it was sort of art out of place, but in terms of it being art out of place it took on a set of—it punched different registers.

JH Slightly tangential, but still I think in the same world is something like the transit van piece in the new show and the previous sort of Warholian *Transit Disasters*; the "white-van" pieces, which, me being American, I'm only now starting to understand.



Gavin Turk. *Transit Disaster Burnt Out White*, 2012. Acrylic paint on canvas, 34×54 x 2.5 cm.

GT It's interesting that when you do the show in America and you speak about Ford transits, everyone assumes they know what that is. And yet the Ford transit van in the UK is really quite acute; it's a culturally specific thing. Although Ford obviously invented the factory line and the process of manufacture, and invented the factory, which I quite like as well because that has a Warhol kick, Ford became a kind of UK company. It was one of the first big UK-producing car companies. And the Dagenham plant, which is not all that far from here, was a very important social site. There's actually a really nice film at the moment about *Made in Dagenham*. But anyway the white transit van is a thing for the English culture—it's a kind of cultural icon! (*laughter*)

JH [In England, the white Ford transit van is a signifier of the working class, the preferred transport of construction workers, contractors, painters, plumbers and the like.] It seems a lot of these—we're still talking about these sculptural works—have a relevance to London, specifically to urban London, to this area I see

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walking around your neighborhood. How important is that kind of invocation of working class, and disappearing working class England, and, similarly, how important is London specifically to your work?

GT I think it is just this thing of art as cultural activity, as a way of unmaking things which, whatever they are, things which will always be subjected to and come out of the cultural context. I think the artist is fated to do that.

JH Fated rather than responsible for?

GT Well this is the thing: At some points I make a kind of touristic [artwork]—I've been involved in waxworks, I've made myself a Queen's guard, I work with fish and chips, cups of tea, blue [historical] plaques. I work very much in a kind of tourist-shop sense where I quite blatantly work with icons of British culture. So there's a real kind of, sometimes a very knowing—not necessarily parody or even a critique of; it's literally just understanding the fated, the apparent, the filter which is already going to be slipped around the work. It's a frame which will be put around the work.

Artwork already has a set of frames. It has a set of values and cultural understandings which will wrap around it; which will give it a certain kind of meaning. I just try to incorporate those things to slightly destabilize the audience into jumping too quickly into the work, to 'over-seeing' the work. It's trying to make the work move at different speeds intellectually so the audience has to readjust their sense of values. Again I come back to the idea that the audience is going to come to it with their own knowledge, and I want them to. With what they've got, with whatever it is, with their fun, let's say, or with their intellect. And that's my challenge, to say how can I help them with my art. Provide, provoke them, or to engage them in their terms.

JH Let's turn that around and talk about the opposite of these sort of unique, readymades turned unique, and talk about the multiples. So many of these works—Gavin Turk as a Warholian Elvis; Gavin Turk as a T-shirt Che Guevara—reference a reference. In some ways it's perfect for this cultural moment when everything is ubiquitous. That sounds kind of funny, but there's so much of everything everywhere. But at the same time—

GT But at the same time there can't be, but yeah.



Gavin Turk, Judith Collins, Iain Sinclair. Gavin Turk, 2013. Monograph, published by Prestel.

JH But in that world, in that sort of internet-meme world, does that sort of change, now that you've been doing it for 20-plus years? Does that change the meaning of multiples? And the meaning of these cultural references?

GT I think it does. It's continually awkward—it's like, I always talk about bending a stick until it breaks. You know that once it's broken you can actually say, I bent this stick as far as it could go until it breaks. But you know that you've gone—you know that there was a point within that process where you bent it as far as it could go. But it does seem at the moment that it becomes very difficult to actually break that stick. As you take an idea and you repeat, repeat, repeat, you're already in this repeated process. You do sort of wonder if it's actually possible to repeat enough, to escape repetition in itself?

JH To break orbit.

GT Or every time you repeat it, it's like, My God! It's actually different! It's not actually about repetition, it's about every time you repeat something, something's getting lost, but something's getting gained. And sometimes you can actually forget the bit that got lost and you only gain. I like the idea of trying to think of art in this sort of meme world, and I'm—I think that it's beautifully about the power of people just coming together. It's almost like the memes are these kind of contemporary clichés, it's making clichés, somehow for some reason enough people get attracted to something to kind of make it into a happening, a thing, like a phenomena. It's a sea of phenomena.

Obviously, in many ways the artistic practice still has to be seen in this quite classical format: here's an artist who develops a philosophy or a series of objects which serve to illustrate his thoughts or his ideas, and the objects almost like by necessity seem to get referred back to the artist. I have to sit here talking about my practice, I have to sit here talking about what my intentions are or where I'm trying to go with my art. Whereas if you were trying to track down a meme you might not be able to find the source of it, it doesn't have any source.

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Gavin Turk. Rock Gunslinger Yellow and Green, 2012. Acrylic paint on canvas, 129×93 cm.

JH The way you're describing it reminds me of a folk song: it doesn't have an original author; it gets changed by every layer. And so for example these newer, these 2012 Elvis prints, it's you, you take it back it's Warhol, you take it back it's Elvis, you take it back it's the cowboy gunslinger image, take it back it's just America, and then in a way it's so many of those things, I think is what you're saying. It's so many of those things that it's all and none.

GT It's all and none. I think it's very much like that, especially with that image because that image is probably most—I think that one more than all the other images probably is the most me-created and also lost within a kind of nonspecific place.

JH Did you say re-created or . . .

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GT *Me-created*, i.e., there is no Warhol of this cropped kind of head, it doesn't exist. It's a 'me' kind of crop on the head. And obviously it's me, when you look at it—I think you do recognize what it's trying to be, as much as anything its origins are the fact that it's obviously not Elvis. It's some weird kind of rockabilly type that reminds you of the iconic Elvis image. You get this kind of like, Oh, well, this is that Gavin Turk Elvis. (*laughter*)

JH Right. So it's closer to sort of those Cindy Sherman genre things?

GT It becomes more like that, I think.

JH One of the things that I think is really great about your use of yourself is you always seem to come across in those as a little bit humble despite putting yourself into these; just the way your face looks there's never a sort of smirking.

GT I'm trying to do the do. Do the look. (*laughter*) My face is only in there to, as much as anything, to not be the face of the person that is supposed to be there. My face is the not-face; it really is like the impersonator. The band impersonator, the Elvis impersonator, the most striking, wonderful thing is that it's not the actual person. Although there may be all these trimmings and trappings and everything might be more Elvis than Elvis in many senses, the main point is it's not. And I think that not-ness is again, is about me trying to think about truth and reality, and how I'm doing it is to use obvious falsities, is to use visible and very in-your-face fakes. An immediate fake is the thing—it's got to be a good quality fake so that you can enjoy the fake for other reasons! (*laughter*)

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