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# Gavin Turk, exhibition review: A trip inside Turk's quirky imagination

This joint effort by Turk and Damien Hirst is both glamorous and absurdly humble, writes Matthew Collings



MATTHEW COLLINGS | Tuesday 22 November 2016 | 0 comments



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Artful balance: Turk revisits the broadly humanistic themes he's always worked with

**The installation of this partial survey of 25 years' worth of work by sculptor Gavin Turk is a joint effort by Turk and Damien Hirst, and it's very good. Hirst owns 90 works by Turk, acquired since the late 1990s and in many of the cases without Turk particularly being aware of it at the time. It's a weird variety of objects. Some are absurdly humble while others are glamorous. Status and identity are one of the themes the installation causes you to notice.**

An **artist's** signature is a loaded thing, it can mean the difference between a lot of money and very little, but also a feeling that something truly significant is happening even though what exactly it is might be elusive. You give mystery the benefit of the doubt if you know it's a great artist. But Turk plays with this doubt, as he repeatedly shows you his own name in odd ways, often in connection with certain well-known styles of modern art that other artists invented.

A set of paintings exactly resembling – at least from a distance – masterpieces by **Jackson Pollock**, turns out to be Turk philosophically gnawing at the theme of status. Pollock is a great painter but the ordinary public is never sure if this might not just be an idea of some intellectuals who are never held to account. What if Pollock was really just rubbish? Is it only the fetishised name of the artist that guarantees significance?

Sure enough, every loop of thrown and dripped paint in these rather impressive Pollock forgeries is a looping fragment of an aspect of one of the letters, or several of them, in Turk's signature. You can never see a whole spelled out name because it's overlain with drippy repeats of itself, but you know it's there.

In *Unoriginal Signature*, 1996, the name is cast in letters of steel, greatly enlarged – so it's dozens of feet wide – plus stretched and angled to precisely the same degree as the famous anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. He's also decorated them with natural sponges soaked in blue paint. It was Bruce Nauman who created a work in the 1960s that consisted of the letters of his own name stretched out, and Yves Klein, in the previous decade, presented blue sponges as sculpture. The classical theme of *momenti mori* or the reminder of death, that Turk connects to these figures of avant-gardism, via Holbein, resonates everywhere in the show.

He can give himself a very humble status, which can also seem elevated. In one work his name is on a piece of brown paper, done in white, in the bottom right-hand corner. It's only a small piece of paper but there's nothing on it except this signature. Then, a further twist: closer examination reveals the letters to have been cut out with the point of a scalpel. A sheet of white paper has been laid beneath the brown sheet, so the signature reads as white. You realise it is not only very small but it's also a kind of ghost, a negative not a positive.

The negative signature, and the signature that reminds us of a skull: everything has this play of readings where something is not only a bit different to what it at first seems, or contains a few more meanings, but also feeds meaning in to other things. When we encounter paintings that seem to be by Andy Warhol of Elvis Presley, they are in fact by Turk, based on a photo of a sculpture of himself posing as Sid Vicious posing as Elvis Presley, in a famous punk film from the 1970s. The wallpaper these mock Warhols or mocked selves are on features a pattern of shapes whose basic unit is Gavin Turk's sneer.



Artist Gavin Turk (Gavin Turk Studio)

Other concocted Warhols in the same space look like those notorious ones based on news photos of car crashes. Warhol is a glamorous figure but Turk unglamorises him, or cuts him down to his own size, or to the size of the humble Turk that Turk often plays.

He stages a smash-up in a real London street between his own white transit van and another car he owns, takes photos of the result and uses them for his own simulated Warhols. He also displays that transit van in the same space, compressed into a cube, as a sculpture.

Rubbish is the flipside to status. The thrown away and the overlooked take their place here in the form of empty Styrofoam boxes that used to contain fried chicken, a car wheel with a flat tyre, a homeless person's dirty sleeping bag and tied-up black bin bags.

A lifesize rubbish skip, in shiny black painted steel, occupies a great deal of space, like a menacing minimal-art sculpture, while still obviously a skip. And it's surrounded by those scraps of rubbish just mentioned, as if there might be someone in to sweep them up any minute. They're each in fact meticulous bronze casts that have been painted with tremendous care in trompe l'oeil style to resemble rubbish.

If you're not famous are you nothing? A number of lifesize replicas of Turk show him not being himself but someone else: there's Turk as Sid Vicious (and Elvis Presley) but also as an alcoholic rough sleeper, and a Queen's Guard in a sentry box. Another Turk is a bronze fountain feature holding up a length of hosepipe – whenever a passing viewer activates a hidden sensor the hose sprays water and cools Turk's inventive buzzing head.

The meanings of these Turk doppelgangers are ambivalent or just strange, but also they seem to multiply and repeat, feeding off each other, and provide clues about objects encountered later that have something about them that you realise you're only noticing because it resonates with something you saw earlier. This could sound maddening but the display is so artfully balanced between Zen calm emptiness and splendid overkill that it conquers all resistance. Turk's quirky imagination is brought out as well as the broadly humanistic themes he's always worked with: knowledge, art, identity and death.

*Gavin Turk: Who What When Where How & Why is at the Newport Street Gallery, SE11 from tomorrow until March 19;*  
[newportstreetgallery.com](http://newportstreetgallery.com)

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