

# The art of selling out

**Ever since Andy Warhol, the worlds of art and finance have been inseparable. On the eve of Tate Modern's Pop Life exhibition, Sean O'Hagan visits five art superstars in their studios to find out how the market drives their creative process**

Portraits **Karen Robinson** and **Steve Pyke**

**N**ext month, Tate Modern will host a stellar group show entitled Pop Life. Apparently, the show was going to be called Sold Out – a much more provocative and, some would say, apposite title, given that among the themes addressed by the curators is the notion of the artist as brand. Think Damien Hirst, think Jeff Koons, think, above all, Andy Warhol.

Twenty-two years after his death, and over 40 years after his ascendancy as America's most famous Pop artist, Warhol remains an influential figure on the making and selling of art. As his most obvious heir, Damien Hirst, puts it, "Warhol really brought money into the equation. He made it acceptable for artists to think about money. In the world we live in today, money is a big issue. It's as big as love, maybe even bigger."

In a culture in thrall to advertising, marketing and celebrity, Warhol made art that mirrored that hyper-real world of commodification even as it critiqued it. His definition of the word artist was "someone who produces things that people don't need to have". He called his studio the Factory and his means of production defined the ultra-capitalist creed by which many successful younger artists now live. "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art," he wrote.

To see how art and money co-exist at the highest level, you need to attend an international art fair, or better still, a Sotheby's auction. If you want to dig deeper, though, to find out how much the creative process has altered to accommodate the market, the artist's studio is still the best place to visit.

Hirst's main studio is in Stroud in rural Gloucestershire. It comprises a huge hangar-like room and various smaller offices situated opposite an old house he is currently renovating. The floors of the house are paved with ornately inscribed Victorian gravestones, the walls panelled in dark wood ▶



◀ decorated by carved skulls and skeletons. Hirst has absorbed Warhol's obsession with death as well as his acute business acumen. He is now the world's most expensive living artist, his diamond-encrusted human skull, *For the Love of God*, a kind of memento mori for the days of art-market hysteria that preceded the current global recession.

Like the two main contenders for his throne, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, Hirst is essentially an ideas man. The ideas he hatches in his head are converted into artworks by a team of assistants that, until recently, numbered 150. The day I visited, though, his vast studio space in Stroud seemed eerily empty, save for a gaggle of multi-coloured skeletons that stood sentinel at one end. A single glass case on a plinth housed a life-sized human skull made out of hundreds of dead house flies. Possibly a metaphor for the art market.

In stark contrast, Jeff Koons's studio complex in midtown Manhattan was a hive of activity. In the main office, Koons sat at a computer working on ideas, prototypes, drawings, while an assistant showed me around the web of interlinked rooms. In one long, well-lit space, eight huge paintings were being worked on simultaneously by groups of two or three artists. In another, a team of masked and white-suited assistants laboured over a giant inflatable lobster. It looked like some weird sci-fi operating theatre. Despite Koons's air of unreal calmness, it was an oddly unrelaxing place to be.

The next day, I travelled out to Long Island to Takashi Murakami's studio. In one room, a single "superflat" painting lay on a table. The latest layer of paint, laboriously applied by several assistants to his precise specifications, was slowly drying. Nearby stood an assortment of Perspex boxes, numbered and coded, containing paint pigments. An assistant insisted that they had catalogued around 40 shades of white. "Murakami is a little obsessive," she said, smiling. That much was evident.

In another room, we watched one of his animated short films, a futuristic whimsy that involved a Godzilla-like monster and a giant animated turd. "Murakami is obsessed with poo-poo," the same assistant explained. I wondered if this infantile world of cuddly soft toys and ejaculating superheroes reflected our own increasingly infantile culture, or was simply another aspect of it.

It was something of a relief, then, to visit Gavin Turk's studio in a lock-up in Hackney, east London. He was hanging a huge screen print on the wall as I came in. It was a Warhol-style self-portrait. This was doubly – or perhaps triply – ironic because his workspace was the least Factory-like of all those I visited and seemed the least driven by the art market. It appeared instead like a place where an artist actually worked hands-on, making his art.

"It's a workshop," Turk said, matter-of-factly. "A place where you can just go and make stuff." It looked messy and disordered and somehow real. It smelled of paint, dust, chemicals and cooking. It did not smell of money. It seemed almost quaint, but this is how most artists still live. The art superstars are the exceptions and only time will tell if the work they produce is a symptom or a reflection of our material culture, and if it is as significant as the prices would have you believe. ★





PHOTOGRAPH HUGO GLENNING; © GAVIN TURK

## Gavin Turk Hackney, east London

**G**avin Turk's studio is a lock-up in Hackney, near a flyover and close to the frantic work-in-progress that is the Olympic Stadium. The first thing you see as you enter is a large Warhol-style silkscreen of Turk as Joseph Beuys. Identity, ambiguity, self-perception, these are the amorphous themes that Turk plays with constantly in his work.

"I'm very interested in cliché and the notion of what art can be, so Warhol is a constant presence. He's there in the *Pop* piece, of course [Turk's waxwork of himself as an amalgam of Sid Vicious and a gunslinging Elvis Presley] and in my silk-screened self-portraits."

Turk jumps up and drags out a silkscreen of himself as Warhol, complete with a fright wig. "I kind of think of Warhol every time I sit at a computer. There's an art button on every computer that allows you to Warholise even your family snapshots and portraits. That's how omnipresent he is, even if we don't realise it."

Turk employs six assistants to help make his work. "It's more about time management than anything," he says. "They do stuff I don't have the time to do."

In an adjoining room that looks like a garage,

he has an industrial-size paint sprayer. A long table covered in paint and paper doubles as a silkscreen bed. "We're not that good, but that kind of works because I want to keep the image scruffy. Professional silkscreeners always do it too perfectly."

In *Pop Life*, Turk will be represented by *Pop* and by *Cave*, his famous blue heritage plaque commemorating himself. "I heard initially that the show was going to be called *Sold Out*, and I really like that title. At what point does bringing art into public awareness become selling out? Can you embrace the market without selling out somehow? These are old-fashioned questions now, but they still resonate."

He tells me an illuminating story concerning one of his more provocative early works, a drawing of his signature. "I had sold it to a collector, but it was still in the studio, when a mate of mine bashed into it. I said, 'Be careful, mate, someone's just bought that for 600 quid.' He looked at me as if I was mad, then he picked up the piece and stared at it really intensely for about 10 minutes. He was trying to see what 600 quid looked like. The money element had made him look closely at the work in a way he would not have done otherwise. It was all really odd. It made me realise how much money affects the way we look at art, how much it affects the way we look at the world." ★



*Pop Life: Art in a Material World* is at Tate Modern from 1 October 2009 to 17 January 2010 ([www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk))

"My assistants do the stuff I don't have time to do. It's more about time management": (above) Turk in front of a vast silkscreen. Left: *Pop*, 1993