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Stuart at work

# *A Happy* HOMECOMING

He has collaborated with Lady Gaga and The Prodigy, had his works bought by Debbie Harry and Johnny Depp and is hailed as the new Andy Warhol, but Stuart Semple's heart will always belong to Bournemouth

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**A**t art school in Poole back in the late 1990s, Stuart Semple dreamed of success. He imagined a big studio of his own and glamorous clients.

Within ten years he was living that dream. He was a big-shot painter, achingly fashionable, a well-connected name on the hip Hoxton/East London art scene. On the face of it things couldn't get much better. His paintings sold for thousands. Debbie Harry, Brian Eno, even Johnny Depp loved his work.

He had a massive studio and a dedicated team of people helping him feed the demand for more and more paintings. The media were calling him the 'new Andy Warhol'.

But Stuart found himself hankering after simpler days back in Dorset when painting was the name of the game and business was something other people took care of.

He tried to invest the money he had made in his own island retreat in Poole Harbour. In 2010 he offered a million pounds to buy the 31 acre Long Island with the idea that he could build a house and studio and perhaps offer summer courses for young artists. It wasn't to be. The island eventually sold to a mystery bidder for £3 million.

"I couldn't match that," says Stuart. "Anyway none of my plans were possible. There are no services at all on the island all you could do with it was sit there and look at birds. So that was that."

He still wanted to come home though and last summer after a decade in the fast lane he took the plunge, left the big city and took a new studio in Parkstone. Sitting in a pub in Bournemouth sipping a cappuccino Stuart told me. "To be honest I was burnt out. I needed time to recharge and think about my work again and this was the place to do it. I'm comfortable here."

He says he resisted the move for quite a while. "I was scared it might look as though I was going backwards but it feels right. It feels like coming home."

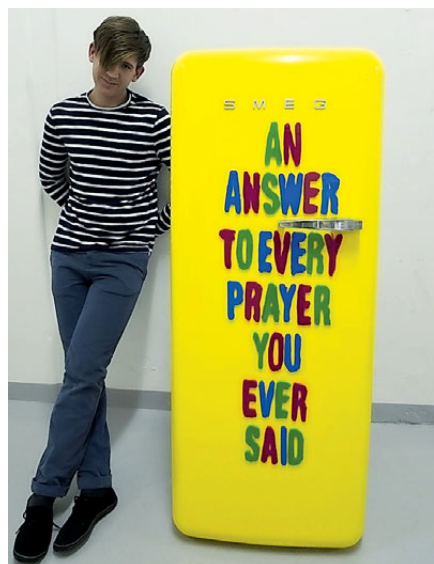
Stuart laughs at the irony. "I was so excited when I first went to Poole College back in 1997. It was the year of the Young British Artist's and the Sensation exhibition at the RA (Royal Academy). Damien Hirst had just sold his giant shark for 50 grand or whatever. Suddenly I realised I really could be an artist. Nothing like that had ever happened before. Before that artists used to lop off their ears and die in garrets."

Initially Stuart sold paintings on eBay using the pseudonym Nancyboy. He



Artist Stuart Semple pictured in Westbourne

*"It's incredibly important to get kids into art shows and to get them engaged with what's going on... If you understand pop music, you'll understand contemporary art"*



Stuart with one of his fridges



'Teardrops on the Dancefloor' featuring Lady Gaga

attracted almost instant attention and high-profile buyers including the aforementioned Debbie Harry. He hit the London scene running, but by the time he paused to take breath he realised his career was being driven by others.

"It got to stage where I had 30,000 square feet of London studio space and 12 members of staff but I felt disconnected

from my work, even disconnected from who I was. I was so much happier when I was on my own painting in a little room.

"I was getting stressed about where I had to go, who I had to meet, which collector wanted which paintings. It was endless and I was rubbish at it. I never wanted to be a manager or a businessman. I wanted to paint pictures."



Unfortunately the London art business was in overdrive. "I was getting calls and calls from galleries saying 'Can I have another eight of these and by the way I've got ten more people who want paintings.' It was a nightmare."

Damien Hirst's accountant advised him to ramp-up production by taking on assistants to paint-in the large areas of block colour in his work.

"It ended up with me managing the studio and telling other people what to paint. I didn't like that at all, particularly when they started to give me their opinion. I'd tell them exactly what I wanted and they were saying things like: "What I was thinking was that we could do it like this or that.""

Back in Bournemouth and Poole, Stuart can be his own man again. He's still producing major works and showing at international exhibitions. He has a glowing CV too listing solo shows in Italy, Hong Kong, London and New York. There have been collaborations with Lady Gaga, The Prodigy and The Futureheads and he has plenty of plans for the future.

Stuart famously created the seminal performance piece 'Happy Cloud' which found him festooning the London city skyline with thousands of floaty, spirit-lifting, pink smiley clouds.

On another occasion he collected debris from the Momart warehouse fire that had destroyed the work of Tracey Emin and others. The resulting assemblage called 'Burn Baby Burn' contained charred fragments of Emin's famous 'Everyone I Ever Slept With' tent.

It's impressive stuff and it's taken him around the world, but right now Stuart's focused on returning to the area that originally nurtured his artistic talents. Last year he was invited to officially open the new North Light Centre for Art and Design at his alma mater, the Bournemouth and Poole College, and Stuart is passionate about encouraging the next generation of home-grown artists.

He currently has a new solo print and sculpture exhibition - What's Love Got To Do With It? - running at Metropolis Gallery in Westbourne until March 20th and he is selling works at half price to anyone with proof that they live within a 20 mile radius of the gallery. He also offered a free signed limited edition of his print 'No Louder Romance' to the first 50 under 21s to go to the show.

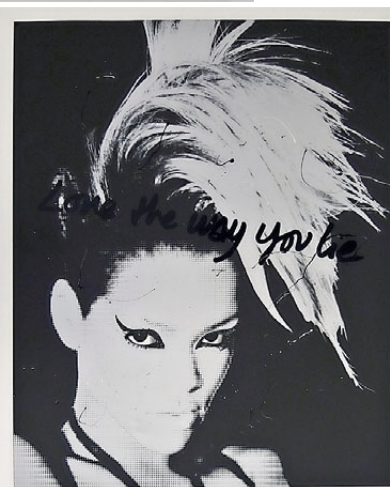
"I'm really keen on establishing the idea that local people can collect contemporary art. That it's not an elitist thing," he explained. "I also think it's incredibly important to get kids into art shows and to



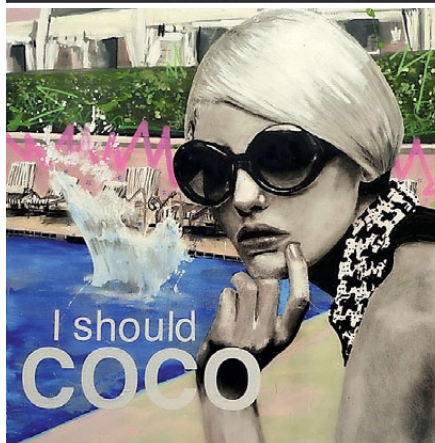
Stuart with his work 'Fated to Pretend'



'Gold Rush 1'



'Love the Way You Lie' (featuring Rihanna)



'I Should Coco'



'I Want your Candy'

get them engaged with what's going on. A lot of people feel that there's a barrier and that art is somehow difficult. It's not. If you understand pop music you'll understand contemporary art. You don't need a book on art history and, above all, it doesn't have to be in a snotty London gallery." There speaks a man who knows. ■

Stuart Semple's solo print and sculpture exhibition *What's Love Got To Do With It?* is at Metropolis, 65 Seamoor Road, Westbourne, Bournemouth, until March 20th. For more details call 01202 768525 or go to [facebook.com/MetropolisArt/wall](https://www.facebook.com/MetropolisArt/wall). You can visit Stuart's own website at [stuartsemple.com](http://stuartsemple.com)