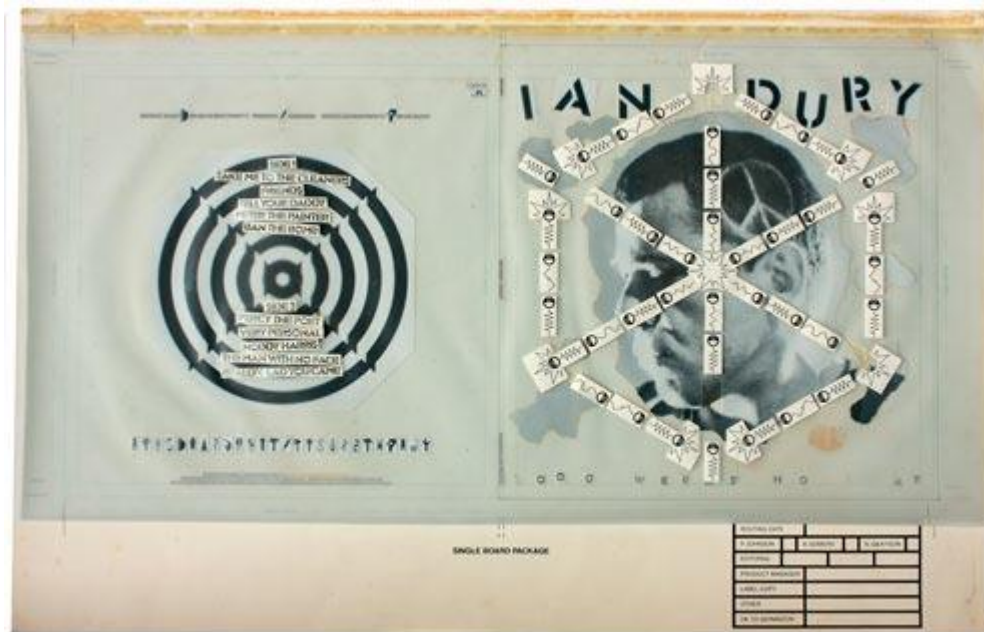


## Meltdown, Bonkers cat and Icebergs

Stuart Semple



I'm sat by the pool overlooking a beautiful bay in Crete, the blue seems to go on forever. London feels like a lifetime away, its another world. The flowers are in full bloom here, it's as if spring has just sprung. Back home the extent of the economic cuts are about to become clear but here none of that matters and what is best is that I've managed to find a little slice of heaven to let the mania of Frieze week fade away.

To me it's hell on hell on earth. It's the most impossible time to actually look or think about art, and it's the most impossible time to have a reasonable and suitably paced conversation. The main difference between Frieze and Ikea is that at Ikea you get in for free and can eat lunch for a few quid. At Frieze it's twenty seven pounds in and lunch, even in the form of a pre-packaged hospital waiting room style vended sandwich will set you back more than a black cab ride across the capital. Either way, there's a whirlwind of exhibitions, chancers and hype machines in operation, everyone competing for some sort of attention. Everyone wants a piece of the action, everyone descends to try and hawk their wares. The danger of course is that it's easy to dismiss the real stuff, which makes the hunt all that more difficult, especially when so much is framed under the pretence of serious and real work. From the All Visual Arts show 'Vanitas' to the Vito Shnabel curated show in an old tramshed in Shoreditch, navigation is always tricky. Within the extremes of the simply awful urban art fest of Moniker Art fair and the bonkers Cat bus by Spartacus Chetwynd in the tent itself, there were some poignant and moving works.

Before I could embark on my art hunt, I had to put the finishing touches on my piece for a charity project in NYC and bung it in a crate for shipping. That done I headed off into town.

In Portland Place 'Vanitas: The Transience of Earthy Pleasures' opened its doors. The old Sierra Leone embassy added the necessary and by now expected atmosphere to

this All Visual Arts production. Their shows always entertain, whether it was 'The Age Of the Marvelous' last year or the fantastic Johnathan Wateridge show a couple of months ago. These guys always deliver on the production stakes. The old regal interior of the building on Protland Place is heightened by the dynamic lighting and eerie conflict that arises when one mixes 27 contemporary artists with paintings from the 17th century. The idea is simple, Vanitas paintings of the 17th century were not only beautiful objects but they are also supposed to act as anchors, or starting points for spiritual introspection, essentially jumping off points to meditate on the meaning of life and inevitable death. There's nothing new in that for Joe La Placa, that's the backbone of his whole curatorial remit. Like Hirst before him death is of course the big thing to ponder. The big question, the unsolved mystery, and in the wake of Hirst's success in never managing to present a definitive conclusion or even opinion in the argument a whole caravan of artists follow in his wake, referencing a sort of creepy Poe type of Victoriana. The fact is that it looks serious, it looks convincing, but ultimately speculation on death is the easiest way to avoid dealing with what's going on in our own lives, in the here and now, on our doorstep. The show, whilst absolutely captivating, in places truly mesmerising does feel very much like a justification for a new type of Gothic movement and for a while it's believable until you realize what is going on outside this narrow remit. Saying that though some of the artists in the show are phenomenal. Martin Sexton's work is always so on point, I love the way he thinks... and Reece Jones' 4 meter long drawings of World War Two bombers and air craft stations posing as icebergs had a quality to them that I loved, it's just the atmosphere and his use of materials, he has an ability to transport me somewhere. In short, I loved the show but I think the curators need to get out a bit more, there is a brighter side to life and it's just outside their back door.

In fact I found it in Chelsea at the Barney Bubbles show, an extension of a book Paul Gorman wrote about him called 'Reasons to Be Cheerful'.

Before all this artworld hallabaloo Barney Bubbles was plying his trade from a shared hippie house in Islington. In those days the record companies and bands really were some of the strangest creative patrons, often giving artists free reign to express themselves alongside music releases, but making videos and album art. You probably know I'm obsessed with that stuff, so it was strange that I knew so little about Barney and hence why I have been so excited and inspired since discovering him.

Meanwhile in NYC, my work has arrived at the Museum of Art and Design for the MetalBall, their annual young patrons gala. Don't forget in America you've got to pay to get into museums, and don't get me started on the future of our museums. Anyway, the idea is to raise as much cash as possible to enable young people to go to the museum for free. The problem was just before the ball I got an email from the curator, it seems the technicians had cracked my piece whilst installing it. As it was a mirror I was nervous that the curse of seven years bad luck might have floated over the proceedings. Sadly, there was nothing to be done but luckily they managed to patch it up in the nick of time and the night apparently went well, with my 'IloveMetal' mirror raising a decent amount for the cause.

Elvis Costello looms in fluorescent colours from above the Chelsea space presiding over the Barney Bubbles retrospective. His off set colouration a frank Homage to Warhol's remix of his iconic cow wallpaper, being printed at almost the same time in the big apple. In the background Barney's seminal music video 'Ghost Town' comes round again on a loop, his rejection of the record labels cash injection resulted in the

best use of one or two lights in music history, and by far one of my favourite videos of all time. This show, brilliantly curated by Paul Gorman gives an insight into how Barney worked. Barney for me is a legend, in fact scratch that he's mythic. Living in his humongous Hoxton loft way before the rats moved out and the loft society moved in. The mental problems that Barney experienced eventually resulted in him taking his own life at a strangely prophetic moment, the year of the first CD and co-incidentally the same year as the first Macintosh computer. Yet in his life Barney is obsessively ordered, a great list maker, down to sketchbooks full of intricate diagrams of all the utensils and objects needed for his new kitchen, teaspoons, mixing bowls and hanging hooks. Colour and personality is breathed back into Barney's life through Paul's vivid and intricate retelling of his thoughts, letters and doodles. There's something wonderfully enlightening about seeing unfinished work, getting up close to Barney's line, cultivated at art school in a time where graphically humans were able to produce almost results comparable in precision to a computer. That time is gone. There was no doubt that Barney was prolific, his videos, and illustrations almost unknowingly defining an era. What floats over the whole output however is an amazing sense of the organic, a flow that Barney was able to embrace, and a phenomenal enjoyment and playful nature that runs through everything he does. An exploration that leads through everything ending in what appears to be a humble man making what he has to because he has to? I suppose the ultimate question is what he would be doing if he were still with us, that unfortunately we would never know. However I remain thankful to Paul for bringing Barney's story and world to light because he's been overlooked so terribly and I believe there is something we can all learn from him.

Just as you don't need a birthday to give someone a gift to show how much you think of them, you don't really need an art fair to act as an excuse to look at art. To a lot of us it's a way of life; we live and breathe contemporary art daily. I must admit I always find it bizarre that it can become a tourist attraction for a bit, quite why an outsider would rather pay to stare at the art market than go to the cinema I don't know. Eight years ago when the Fair started it felt a bit like home, you'd walk round bump into dealers, curators and friends. It was quiet, even slightly low key. Now it's a place to be seen, botoxed faces peering at art made to look good in a botox clinic. Art reflecting what did well at the fair last year and dealers with a slight panic in their eyes that the gamble they took on the fee for the stand might not pay off this time. Still like mafia protection if you're not seen there, you simply don't exist.

I know the country is going to get worse before it gets better and we're in for a long ride. I know the arts are going to suffer; even our best artists who are looking un-trendy are suddenly on trend. When melancholia is the fashion where is the hope, where is the work to lift us up?

Dreaming of Barney I pop my iPod in my ears switch on the clash and stare out to sea. " The ice age is coming, the sun's zooming in, Meltdown expected, the wheat is growing thin, Engines stop running, but I have no fear, Cause London is drowning and I, live by the river