GQ ICON

HENRY HUDSON

Plasticine is hardly the model medium for a painter, yet one artistic pioneer is using the substance to 'sculpt' vast and imaginative images of London's underbelly. Challenging the establishment and driven by a relentless work ethic, meet the visionary who's breaking the mould

STORY BY **DYLAN JONES** PHOTOGRAPH BY **DAVID BAILEY**

Plasticine era: Artist Henry Hudson shot for British GQ by David Bailey, 5 November 2014

You can tell a lot about a person from their Instagram feed. Clichés abound: dogs (especially French bulldogs in little personalised coats), restaurant meals (food porn taken by foodies who spend more time taking pictures than eating), nail art, coffee art (guilty!), pub signs, greetings card maxims, tall buildings shot from the ground, aeroplane wings, babies, circles of feet, maudlin cartoon characters, using the hashtag #nofilter, and, as BuzzFeed once noted, a screen capture of a text message conversation taken out of context, in order to embarrass a friend who has just fallen victim to the phone's "hilarious" autocorrect.

There are, of course, a lot of people out there who have taken to app technology with a vengeance, using the Instagram square as their own constantly replenishing digital canvas, their own video monitor, their own exhibition space, employing everything at their disposal to create a body of work that likes to consider itself art. For them, Instagram is the pomo Polaroid, a genuine postmodern post.

Henry Hudson, 32, a genuine artist, has a refreshingly healthy attitude towards Instagram. As well as his work – both finished and unfinished – there are teasingly ironic selfies, home-made sculptures and pictures that reference his many inspirations. At @henryhudsonartist, you'll also find a tube of Cheez Whiz, a photograph of Che Guevara and, of course, lots of photographs of Plasticine.

The putty-like modelling clay is Hudson's medium of choice, and he uses it to create his incredibly intricate and extravagant pictures. Although it's famous as something popular with children, Plasticine was actually invented by an art teacher, William Harbutt, in Bath in the late 19th century, who wanted a non-drying clay for his sculpture students. Since then it has often been used by artists, but the material started to become popular again when it began being used by Nick Park in his Wallace and Gromit films at the end of the Eighties.

Plasticine is a very British medium and >

Photographs Henry Hudson Studio

Make a mess: 'The Mask Falls Off – The After Party' (2014) will show at Henry Hudson's exhibition, The Rise And Fall Of Young Sen – The Contemporary Artist's Progress

Hudson is a very British artist. The son of sculptor Richard Hudson, Henry's artistic journey started when, aged six, in 1988, he was taken to the National Gallery and had something of a revelatory moment when he saw Henri Rousseau's "Surprised!" (the painter's famous study of a tiger hunting). He asked to be bought a postcard and promptly took it home to copy. His father not only encouraged him to draw, he would also take him out on Soho drinking sessions, meeting the likes of Lucian Freud. Henry got the bug – for drawing, not drink – and started calling himself an artist long before he enrolled at Chelsea College Of Art in 2001, later moving on to Central Saint Martins in 2002. When a friend offered to put on a show for him, and having no finished work, Hudson Jnr started drawing furiously. Needing supplies, he went to a local art shop, but instead of walking out with some gouache or tubes of oils, he emerged with a bag of Plasticine.

At 80p a bar, it was exactly one eighth the price of a small tube of oil paint, and when he took it home and saw it had varnish and oils in it, he thought, "Surely you can paint with this." He not only painted with it – melting it down and giving it a texture and a density not associated with the medium – he created an entirely new genre in the process. Many artists have used Plasticine in the past, but few with the ambition seen in Hudson's work.

"If you go to an art shop and you have £30 to spend and you want to do a thick expressionist painting, like a Cecily Brown even, you're looking at £300 before you even start," says Hudson. He experimented first with a copy of a small Philip Guston work and never looked back. He has had a few run-ins with some of the more traditional organisations in the art world – he was excluded from entering his work for a reputable painting prize because, well, they didn't consider what he did to be painting – and has been accused of using Plasticine as a gimmick ("I do enjoy the performance aspect of it," he told me). Nevertheless, Plasticine has undoubtedly become his thing.

"There was a certain novelty in using Plasticine, especially as a lot of the work I did at Saint Martins was performance and video based. I started to get to a point where I was really enjoying working with my hands. I also got to the point where I didn't feel like I was ready to do an MA. Plus, I was broke, and wanted to get to work."

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Clay station: 1. Shots from Hudson's carefully moulded Instagram feed. 2. Works in progress at the artist's east London studio. 3. The bronze sculpture of 'Lost Property' (2014) tops an LED plinth with animations of Hudson's drawings. 4. Details of plate 1 of The Contemporary Artist's Progress (2014). 5. Early drawing of plate 2 of the same

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Many artists have used Plasticine in the past, but few with Hudson's ambition

Photographs @henryhudson; Henry Hudson Studio

Plasticine has traditionally been used for illustrative proposes, almost as a gimmick. Just last year a part-time Ukrainian artist, Svitlana Postelga, used the medium to create a collection of works copying iconic paintings, such as "The Creation Of Adam" by Michelangelo, "Vitruvian Man" by Leonardo da Vinci and "Kissing" by Alex Grey. In her case it also appeared to be therapy. "My work is monotonous and hard," she says. "Once, about nine years ago, while I was playing with my kids, I found that Plasticine really helped me forget about my problems. I touched it, started to create something and, during the process, felt myself becoming calm."

Hudson himself appears calm, though not because of his work. His work is painstaking, and while he has assistants who help him, he doesn't have a small army of them, in the tradition of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst. He does dozens of sketches which are then weaved into his larger works, sometimes using himself as a model. His new works are the most elaborate things he's done, requiring more prep, more research, and more actual handwork with the Plasticine itself. Like a Renaissance painter, he only gets his helpers to work on the more prosaic elements of his work – he doesn't allow them to paint anything that's living. Nothing moving, nothing breathing. No flesh, sky or water. Hudson will do all of that, all of the faces, all of the elements you're going to remember. As he says himself, it's about the mark making. But as his team have needed to be trained in the rudiments of what he does, it makes the process even more protracted. "It's very tiring, teaching them and allowing other people to get involved in the work of actually making the pictures," he says. "The whole psychology of the daily routine, working all through the day and sometimes all through the night, it's consuming. I'm here every day, every weekend, all the time. For this new show, I haven't seen daylight for such a long time.

"In a way what I'm doing is sculpture, like my father. For him sculpture was a very time-consuming process. He would make a maquette, which might be physically exhausting, and might take him a day or two days to produce. And then the rest of the time was having it made, housing it, moving it around. Sculpture is very demanding, time-consuming. It's not about dipping a paintbrush in a pot so you can get a quick line.

Money from heaven: Studies of plate 5 of The Contemporary Artist's Progress (2014)

"People always ask, 'How long will it last?' Well, Plasticine has only been around for 100 years, but the acrylic specialists I've spoken to say it should last forever as long as it's kept in the right conditions. If you varnish it properly, there's no reason why it shouldn't live forever."

Hudson lives above his Roman Road studio in east London, and – as he says himself – for the two years he has been embroiled in preparing for this new show has rarely surfaced. Perhaps that's why his girlfriend left him last year. "It was unsurprising," he says.

The first show was a sellout, as was his breakthrough exhibition at the tail end of 2011, a series of works inspired by Hogarth's 18th-century narrative "A Rake's Progress", all made with Plasticine. He very quickly made the medium his own, using it to poke fun at the media and the establishment. One of his shows featured a series of old-fashioned Edwardian and Victorian school blackboards, on which Hudson had sketched in chalk the lavatories of some of London's most prestigious galleries. Another piece was a bust of his own head made up of human hair he had collected on the London Underground, a seven-month job. He quickly became renowned for satirising tradition and lampooning society – not in the aggressive way the Chapman Brothers do, but with an archness that hints at a far keener mind.

He tends to paint modern tableaux full of theatrical narratives – in his larger work you'll find the sick, the depraved, the rich, the disenfranchised and the sullen.

Three years ago, Hudson showed a series of his works at the F2 Gallery in Beijing under the title *Between A Rock And A Hard Place*. Pieces ranged from "Contemplating Picasso Drunk" (Hudson as Picasso, clutching a bottle of booze covered with "fragile" tape) to "Do Not Fear Death So Much, But Rather The Inadequate Life" (Hudson topless, holding a dripping red paintbrush, the word "Fragile" painted behind him on the wall and blue Superman Y-fronts stretched over his head). As *Time Out* Beijing said at the time, all were playful and self-mocking, a mixture of mutiny and jocularity.

According to his friend and benefactor Marc Quinn, Hudson "aligns himself with an irreverent and eccentric British tradition in art that is really the saviour of it. Hogarth, Burra, Bacon, Auerbach – it's a lineage of nonconformity yet quintessential Britishness that is unique to our tradition. Hudson has also reinvented this tradition in his visual, trembling, vibrating, sculpted paintings."

With his Burberry-model looks and open face, Hudson is an appealing character. He is incredibly charming, walking around his east London studio with a big fedora and a smile, looking a little like David Niven might have looked if he had played The Man With

Photographs Henry Hudson Studio

Hudson knows his art has as much to do with craft and ingenuity as innate artistry or God-like genius

The Yellow Hat in the *Curious George* books. Hudson is also reassuringly straightforward, with none of the artifice that appears to envelop so many modern artists. When he talks – describing the process of making his work; discussing the gentrification of his neighbourhood (his studio is in one of those understandably divisive areas that appears resistant to change and he has encouraged his friend Mark Hix to open a restaurant in the area); or the influence of his father – he does so without any hint of edge. Indeed, there appears to be no "side" to him. I had expected someone who perhaps carried their social conscience on their shoulders, who wore their caustic wit on their sleeve. But Hudson is as guileless as he is talented. There is a tendency among some artists to treat their mark making as though it were somehow divine; Hudson knows that his art has as much to do with craft and ingenuity as innate artistry or God-like genius.

Like many artists his age, Hudson believes that London is pretty much the most exciting place to be right now. If you have the wherewithal, that is. He was known for being rather social in his twenties, and for a while was almost a glossy-magazine poster boy for the art world after dark. "I think people were definitely trying to find their identities. I certainly was. I was kind of looking in all the wrong places truthfully, I was kind of looking in bars and you know, sort of being more frivolous, I should probably have had my face in more books. But I'd been banged up at boarding school all my life so I was kind of running free really, getting into trouble.

"It's a dangerous thing to say but I think certainly New York feels like it's got a bit of a hangover. I think here in London we had a similar hangover after the YBAs, as they were so phenomenal. But London is back. Art and economics definitely work together, so when there was money to spend, it got spent and it filtered through to the arts. And so in London you got a lot of people making big art and big money quickly, and even though that's a very unrealistic template for arts – it's dangerous because you really need time to develop your skill or your talent, and to grow up – it is still an intoxicating environment. Art is everywhere now, too, just look at Instagram. I can now access any artist and see what they're up to, from Richard Prince to Genieve Figgis. I think she's 45, she's done all the right things, she's been to college, she's a mum, living in Ireland, she had a small show in Transition Gallery, but nothing really happened. Then Richard Prince saw her work on Instagram and boom! And quite right too, because they're beautiful paintings. And that's really amazing, that's technology helping someone whose work should be being seen and wasn't being seen."

It is difficult to look at Hudson's paintings without marvelling at the intricacies of the work. The first time I saw one of his pieces, I'd just walked into the south London outpost of Hix, one of Mark Hix's many eponymous restaurants, and I couldn't quite believe it. I'd seen reproductions of his work before, but having never seen one in the flesh, so to speak, had no idea how clever they were. His new show is probably his most ambitious yet. It is certainly his largest. This month Sotheby's S2 gallery presents *The Rise And Fall Of Young Sen – The Contemporary Artist's Progress*, another modern day interpretation of "A Rake's Progress" that includes ten large-scale Plasticine paintings, ten original drawings and 30 smaller studies, each depicting the various stage of the protagonist's life and decline. True to form, the pictures are saturated with contemporary cultural references, "satirising the absurdity of modern life, from political issues to social stereotypes and the contemporary art world".

The star of Hudson's latest iteration of "A Rake's Progress" is Chinese. "I did it because China's the emerging economy of the world, and we live in a global economy, and I thought it would be interesting to make it a bit more international. So my character is a child prodigy born into a sort of sweatshop, which in this scenario is Foxconn, who make all the smartphones. He's a sort of child star, and he gets an unconditional offer to study at King's College in London, which is his downfall. It's a story of the old China, the new China." Isn't it just.

The paintings are extraordinary, as is the narrative: the pictures show young Sen leaving his lowly village in rural China, studying medicine at King's College London, enjoying the craziness of Trafalgar Square, attending the private view of a contemporary art exhibition, trussed up at his visa wedding, caught at a drug-fuelled afterparty, sitting in his crack den, enduring rehab in the Swiss Alps, and finally being executed. These works are *Where's Wally*-type labyrinths. Here you'll see a Hello Kitty love note, there a spot of bird flu. Over there an Ai Weiwei pot. In the London works you'll find references to Nigel Farage, Damien Hirst, McDonald's, Grayson Perry, Louis Vuitton, Tommy Hilfiger, *Vanity Fair* and references to Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden Of Earthly Delights". These are smorgasbords of contemporary culture, littered with classical references and arty in-jokes. They are also incredibly detailed; in one painting you can see ecstasy tablets with little faces on them. His work is similar, in a way, to the work of Grayson Perry, although prod him on this and he'll say that actually Perry's work is rather similar to his.

Hudson won't be using Plasticine forever, and has already started producing prints and editions of his work. He enjoys actual painting too and is not oblivious to the commercial constraints of spending such a long time producing his work. There is an extraordinary amount of passion in what he does, though, and Hudson has a definite understanding of his own worth. He is not a gimmick.

Being trapped in a studio for the best part of two years has made him slightly stir crazy, and for his next project he wants to travel. He's not exactly sure where, and he's not sure what he'll do when he gets there, but he knows he wants to get on a plane. "I'm just gonna go. I'll either do a Peter Doig and go to Trinidad & Tobago… or I'm thinking of Gauguin and maybe go to French Polynesia and do some jungle paintings, but very much just jungle paintings. I'm not sure I want to paint humans for a while. Maybe I'll follow Rousseau."

Whatever it is, he knows he wants to get out of the house.

You can not only tell a lot about a person by their Instagram feed, you can also tell a lot by the people who follow them and who like their posts. After all, social media is the most public status barometer of all.

Just before I left Hudson's Roman Road studio, I took a portrait of him for my own Instagram feed. A few minutes later, as I was sitting in the back of an Addison Lee car, encouraging the driver to take me back to the office rather than disappear into Essex, I posted it.

My first like was from Tommy Hilfiger. Which says a lot more about Henry Hudson than it does about me.

Henry Hudson: The Rise And Fall Of Young Sen – The Contemporary Artist's Progress. Sotheby's S2 Gallery, 31 St George Street, London W1. 23 April - 29 May 2015.

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