Little promises

Of the YBAs who shook up Britart in the 90s, Gary Hume was the quiet one. Not for him the stunts of his peers. He just quietly gets on with what he does best: painting. So much so, that he's now the most successful of the lot

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Gary Hume has been awake for hours, yet looks as if he's just got out of bed. His short hair stands erect, his jeans and T-shirt might have been scraped off the floor. Stubble, flip-flops and a raspy cigarette voice complete the picture - the artist as modern-day bohemian; definitely not the dinner-jacket type.

Hume's London studio has a similarly dishevelled air about it. It's an old clothing factory, brick walls painted white, which you reach from the street via a messy yard. Lit by two rows of safety-glass skylights, it is heated by a huge industrial monster that hangs lopsided from the roof. In one corner, metal shelves teem with household paint, Hume's trademark material, much of which has found its way on to the floor. Propped up against the wall and the few bits of furniture are works for his new show at London's White Cube gallery later this month. The first thing you notice about them is that they have lost some of Hume's characteristic brightness. The colours are still bold, but they are less dazzling; they still grab your attention, but don't make you squint. "It started when I painted one painting and it asked me to be darker; then I felt I enjoyed it," says Hume. "Then I thought, 'I've got some coherence, hurrah!' "

It is typical of Hume to say that his pictures "speak" to him, as though their creation is down to instinct rather than thought. (He is a painter of emotions, he says, not ideas - he doesn't want to tell a story, "I just want to show a picture.") His recent painting of Alice Liddell, the girl who inspired Lewis Carroll's Alice In Wonderland, sat unfinished for weeks while the painter waited for a sign. Every day he stared at it, until the solution came. The little girl, he decided, needed a bag of sweets - suggesting both innocence or, more sinisterly, a bribe. Hume added the shape, and the picture was complete.

Hume says that he knows he's reached the end of the process when a painting "looks like it's always been there, rather than I've made it". It's a subtle distinction, and one that isn't always as obvious to the viewer as it is to the artist. Why, for instance, does Hume loathe an inoffensive-looking painting of red and pink flowers standing nearby? "I'd hate to turn up and see it on someone's wall in five years' time and think, 'I hate that fucking thing.' I'd be ashamed," he says.

Sellotaped to the floor in front of each of these new paintings are scraps of paper with titles scribbled on them; it looks as if Hume put them there as an afterthought. One, Baby Lucas, is a picture of the newborn son of his friend, the sculptor Marc Quinn. There are three colours in the painting, which, apart from the infant's orange genitals, is muddy-looking and sombre: there's no hint of the joy that you'd assume follows the birth of a child. "I find babies, when they arrive, they come from outer space," says Hume, who has a 15-year-old son. "This thing is there, it's incredibly demanding and foreign. It's, 'My God! I have a baby.' "

Hume was among the first Young British Artists, or YBAs, to emerge in the BritArt scene of the 1990s. His degree show, on graduating from Goldsmiths, got him instant critical attention, and his work was bought by Charles Saatchi. Yet, despite being one of the bestselling artists represented by the bestselling White Cube gallery, he has never had the profile of his peers Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. The explanation for this is easy enough: Hume is a painter, and in today's climate painting is not as sexy, or as newsworthy, as a chopped-up cow or an unmade bed.

Hume claims that he is happy to be out of the limelight, but angry at the media's skewed coverage of modern art. "The most tedious thing is this whole 'shocking' shit," he croaks. "Constantly. Like the only purpose of art is to shock the public. They try to make anything shocking that isn't shocking at all, and if it isn't shocking then it isn't worth looking at, which is very disappointing, because I don't do anything shocking." His paintings are instead easy on the eye, slick, shiny gloss paint on aluminium panels. Typically, they consist of bold and distinctively urban colours, rendered as big blobs or confident outlines and silhouettes. Despite their scruffy

creator, they are neat and show great control.

For Hume, these paintings are "gifts" rather than "shocks", the products of a "wonderful solitary experience, where you do things quietly". A Gary Hume picture would make a nice decoration, which is one reason he is so collectable. But what divides the critics is whether there's any substance behind the lurid gloss. His admirers argue that his paintings are an apt reflection of the shallowness of our times, that they are as superficial as the 1990s, the decade that inspired them. Look at them, and you see yourself reflected in a surface as beguiling as a fancy sports car: who cares, then, whether there's nothing more to it?

Hume's detractors think this a very good reason for not looking at them in the first place. "They offer nothing but a moment's glister and demand no contemplation," wrote the critic Brian Sewell. Gary Glitter, Mr Sheen, pretty vacant: Hume has heard them all.

"I don't feel that my work is shallow," he says, although he insists that people make up their own minds. Take your time with my work, he says, and you'll get more from it: "I'd like to give people leaden boots in galleries, so they'd be a bit slower in front of my paintings. And that's because I spend so much time looking at them. I can look at them a long, long time without getting bored. I disappear."

Perhaps one of the reasons his work provokes such strong love-it, hate-it reactions is that, despite the surface simplicity, there are surprising emotional undercurrents: his paintings can be comforting and alienating at the same time. Hume's world of outlines and surface has a coldness to it, and hints at inner sadness. "There's a sensitivity that life is not a bed of roses and the paintings know that," Hume says. Yet the pictures can be comforting, in the same way bright, simple objects or images appeal to a small baby.

He has a reputation for being surly with journalists. In 1996, he was the only artist shortlisted for the Turner Prize not to talk to the television cameras. His friends claim that he is painfully shy, and it doesn't help that he is not a big smiler. But when he talks about his work, his voice threatening to break like that of a spotty teenager, a more sensitive side emerges.

It's clear, then, that he is not a master of the soundbite. His replies to questions are clumsy and he speaks in broken sentences, repeating himself for emphasis, changing tack as he rearranges his thoughts or when a better answer occurs. (It's easy to see why he wants you to make up your own mind about a painting, rather than talk you through it.) Describing Wet Nurse, his picture of a woman feeding a baby, he says, "It's the idea of small promises that never come to fruition. When you're a child, you think they are going to happen and it never happens and it's part of life; these things never come to pass. I was trying to show something about these little promises that get lost. The melancholy of being a wet nurse must be quite extraordinary. If you're doing that to someone else's baby, there is a promise of motherhood you can't afford - you're doing it for somebody else's life . . ." You get the gist, if not the total sense.

He's vague about his childhood ambitions. He grew up with his mother in Kent, and never planned to be an artist. Was his a creative background? "My mum always liked poetry and she had pictures on the wall, so there was this visual stuff around," he says. And then: "My great-grandfather was an inventor, and my brother is an inventor . . . of radical luggage systems."

At school, he says, he wasn't allowed to do art because he was "too naughty" (this same rebelliousness pushed him into painting years later). "I didn't like being told what to do, so being an artist was a way of not being told what to do and being able to do what I wanted without having to wait for permission." Before that, there was a frustrating stint as an assistant film editor. "And I thought, 'Well, if you don't want to be a film editor, why don't you be a film director?' But I didn't know how good my people skills would be, and also I can't really write, so really it was, like, going down the line thinking where can I be."

And that place was art - or, more accurately, painting. "When I first started, I thought that was all there was. All there is is Picasso and Pollock, and then old paintings, and I thought art equalled painting. And I never thought I could make sculpture because I have a very bad understanding of gravity. They just fell over, basically. Now, I love painting. I love looking. I love the fact that they don't move. They constantly change with the light. They are sort of patient."

He was by this stage living in London, and went to a couple of adult education colleges to get his portfolio

together. He attended Liverpool Polytechnic's art school for a year, before returning to London to finish his degree at Goldsmiths. It was probably the best move he ever made. At Goldsmiths, his contemporaries included Fiona Rae, Matt Collishaw, Sarah Lucas (Hume's then girlfriend) and Damien Hirst, part of a generation of artists that came to dominate British art. At first, remembers Hume, "I was just playing about. I never cared about embarrassing myself with terrible work." It all turned around on seeing a billboard. "Then I saw this advertisement for Bupa or something, and in the background was a hospital door and it looked absolutely perfect and I knew that I could make a painting of it."

So he began doing paintings of doors, complete with porthole windows and kickplates. The models for these were the doors at Barts hospital, in Smithfield, east London, which he meticulously measured and then reproduced as a life-size painting. Exhibited in 1988 at Frieze, the groundbreaking Goldsmiths degree show where, for the first time, student work was exhibited as though it were in a professional gallery, the door paintings were a tremendous success. They were a fashionable blurring of the boundaries between image and object, and the art world was suitably impressed. The punters, meanwhile, Charles Saatchi among them, loved the fact that these elegant, mysterious paintings would also look rather good on their walls.

The doors were painted on MDF and aluminium, materials that have since become Hume trademarks. "I found that gloss paint suited me entirely, and its qualities still intrigue me. It's viscous and fluid and feels like a pool. It's highly reflective, which means there are layers of looking. You look at the picture, and you look at the surface, then you look at the reflection in the surface behind you, then you look at yourself." The ordinariness of household paint, a material we can all get our hands on, added another level to his work. Was Hume, who was once sacked from his job as a decorator for being too slow, asking his audience what it means to be a painter?

But a man cannot live by doors alone, and by 1993 he was looking for his next big idea. It was like the difficult second album or novel, and he admits that he's never found something as "complete" and "perfect" as those early paintings. "For the life of me, I lacked the wit to do that, and had to realise the intellectual side of art was not my place. So there was this whole period of accepting that I could only do what I can, and try to do that with gusto, and accept the embarrassment that I was unable to argue the toss with more intellectual people. It was a crisis, I suppose. A cloud of unknowing descended on me for a while."

Eventually, he moved away from subjects limited to squares, rectangles and circles, and began producing figurative work - abstract, pop art-like pictures, including celebrity B-listers such as Tony Blackburn and Patsy Kensit, before upgrading to Kate Moss. "The Tony Blackburn and Patsy Kensit were more about doing flawed idols with whom I have great empathy," he says. "And Kate Moss: that was the absolute pleasure of using her as this iconic image."

Since then, he's experimented with layered silhouettes of women in Water Pictures, and more naturalistic, less cartoon-like paintings such as Blackbird (1998). Despite his problems with gravity, there is sculpture, too. The snowman is a theme in his work, and he recently finished a piece consisting of three balls placed one on top of the other. This, says the man who claims there are no ideas in his work, harks back to classical sculpture: "The snowman is the perfect sculpture. Like the door was the perfect door. It works entirely in the round: you're supposed to be able to travel around it and there are no dead zones."

He has painted a new version of Moss for the White Cube show, with an unflattering doodle for a nose. **He did Michael Jackson, too, with the same nose, reminding you of the singer's obsession with plastic surgery. "I tried to be as sympathetic as I could," says Hume. "I wasn't in any sense trying to ridicule him. I feel for him." Why Jackson? "The picture chose me - you know, he is a totally peculiar man." He finds inspiration in newspapers and magazines, and from other art shows, too. He gets a picture of what he wants to paint, traces it on acetate, and then projects the outline on to aluminium before painting it in.**

He lives in London with his wife, the artist Georgie Hopton, and has just bought a home in upstate New York. "I didn't want to go to the English countryside," he says, referring to the trend among his peers for a West Country home. "I didn't want to become a gentleman. I didn't want to go into that 'I've done well' thing. [He puts on an aristocratic voice.] 'I'm really successful: come down to my country house. It would be lovely; I've really enjoyed meeting you.'"

He likes to cast himself as a bit of a rebel but on paper at least he's as establishment as they come. Last year, he was the first YBA to be elected to the Royal Academy of Arts, a distinction usually reserved for mainstream figures and mostly those who qualify for a pension (although Fiona Rae did join him recently). His admirers at the RA include 1960s Pop artists Peter Blake and Allen Jones, who say that Hume's appointment was part of an inevitable process of renewal. "When I was a young painter, I wouldn't have been seen dead in the Academy," says Jones. "They'd have thrown me out. But in the 1970s and 1980s, that changed." Of Hume's work, Jones says, "He is on Warhol territory, and that intrigues me." Blake says he recognises Hume's skill first: "And then you covet one of the paintings."

It was "nice" to be honoured in such a way, says Hume, in typically unrevealing manner. Then, after a long pause, "How I got in, God only knows. Many of the academicians are people I've never heard of in my life. The bad thing about the Academy is, it's slow in changing; the good thing about the Academy is, it's slow in changing. The average age is 65 or something . . . 62. So the vast majority of those people have never heard of me because they travel in a different world, like I will when I'm 62."

Hume turned 40 last month and is now a not-so-YBA. He has a routine, getting to the studio around 10am, with a snooze on the daybed after lunch and maybe a break for a pint in the afternoon. He's often there late at night and says he doesn't go out much; with all the time he spends looking at and thinking about a work in progress, he's not exactly rushed off his feet. As if in recognition of the fact that he has a comfortable life and to remind himself what put him there, he has painted a new double-door for the forthcoming show. This one is different, though, enlarged to some 3m high and with a thin, semicircular line painted across the middle. With the two porthole windows of the doors looking like huge, fathomless eyes, the whole painting makes a giant, smiley face