

Soft Cockney, An interview with Enrique Marty, by Dries Verstraete
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Can you explain the title 'Soft Cockney'?

Actually, it grew out of a conversation I had with you. I've been working with the concept of "art is dangerous" for some years, and when the time came to put a title to the exhibition, I realised I had not thought of any. You felt I had to choose another title, do without "Art is Dangerous", and suddenly I could see sense in that. I thought of several titles but I think that, between the both of us, the one we liked best is this one; soft cockney. It fits perfectly with the concept of the exhibition. The Cockneys are inhabitants of a small area of London. In fact, it is actually said that it is those who live close enough to hear the bells of a specific church located in the area. They have a very distinctive accent as well. And, for a long time, Cockney was considered synonymous with criminal, whether this was the actually true or not. In other words, as a symbol, I felt this small and marginal mafia seemed abstract and fuzzy enough. A soft Cockney would be something particularly unusual. I don't think this can be interpreted in any literal manner. It's more like a poetic game.

Does this mean that your sculptures are pretenders and small street criminals rather than really heavy ones?

Yes, in fact the use of tattoos is reserved to petty criminals. The big criminals wear suits and ties and occupy official positions. Those bastards don't have tattoos. Moreover, these pieces are portraits. Portraits of real people, people that are acting. However, the tattoos they are wearing are authentic, and they are a means through which a portrait can be made as well. What I mean is, there is a surface, which is the portrait itself. The body, features etc. And then the tattoo is also a portrait, let's say an "interior" one.

2

Where lies your fascination for tattoos?

Actually I don't wear any and I probably never will. What I'm about to say surely contradicts the very essence of tattoos, and many people will think, this guy is not a real tattoo lover: what I want to say is that the thing I like the least about tattoos is the fact that they are permanent. I don't feel the same every day, far from it. So if I had a tattoo done with a specific meaning, surely, in time, it would no longer apply to me, and I would hate it. And actually, I'm only fascinated with the criminal tattoos. Those of the gangs. Because it means that through their tattoos, right when they have them done, they isolate themselves from society as recognizable members of a criminal group. This is a pact between them. Being permanent, these tattoos become a sort of seal. With a recognizable language if you can read the codes.

3

Upon closer examination, each sculpture seems to be an autonomous iconographic system. Is that so and how does it work?

To make this series, I did research on criminal tattoos and their codes. I asked people who were somehow connected to the world of art (as if selecting a group or a gang, in a way). After making a mould of them and reproducing them as closely as possible, I created an iconography for each one of them. Entirely personalised, based on their personal histories and personality. Some objected when they saw their tattoos. But, if for example, I used neo-Nazi iconography for some of them, that doesn't mean that they are neo-Nazis. That would be easy and uninteresting. It's just so that, within the broad range of languages, it had to fall on someone. It is within the very iconography that we must seek. Anyway, I also have to say that in fact I haven't been very strict, far from it, when it came to scrupulously following each iconography. I used them as a source but then I played with it. At first I considered creating one single tattoo style and apply it to everyone. But in the end I didn't because I thought it would bore me.

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What inspired you to give a certain sculpture a certain iconography?

The person himself. Actually, we all have some ideas about the people around us. And often, they are preconceived. They don't make any sense. This is one of the things I wanted to show here. My own preconceptions in a way. But again, if someone has "White power" or "Supremacism" or a swastika, or a demon written on his back, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're a Nazi or a Satanist. This approach would seem utterly uninteresting to me.

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'Art is dangerous', the first sculpture in which you used tattoos (at least in the order in which they were shown), seems to be the mother of the rest of the tattooed series. Is that so? And how?
Why did you use tattoo there?

Yes, you can say that this started everything. To me, the concept of dangerous art seemed absurd enough to work on. Can it be said that art is dangerous? One's first reaction is to say no. But then one thinks of the "degenerate art" which the Nazis were so opposed to and other art considered decadent or propagandistic. Or works considered blasphemous. Including the fact that the American Abstract Expressionists were supported by the CIA to counter the Russian figurative propagandistic art. This last fact just as an example. The U.S. government considered it important to support a "poetic" art that departed from mere representation. That didn't have any literal content. I feel more connected to Russian or Chinese poster art (even though I don't share the ideology) than to American abstractionism (although I don't share their ideology either). Actually, it seems to me that ideologies are indeed dangerous. The "art is dangerous"-idea is a bit ironic, but it seems wise not think of the "dangerous ideologies" as a joke.

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'Art is dangerous' was one of the last sculptures in which you used a reduced proportion, a principle that seemed crucial to your approach up to now, and it was something that made your work very recognisable. What made you decide to start making sculptural portraits in real size?

Actually, I didn't really stop making reduced-scale sculptures. In fact, I'm presently working on some pieces whose size is even smaller than ever. I'm using the actual size in this series specifically, perhaps maybe in a couple more series as well. In this series I did so because I didn't want the reduced size to be too distracting. Also, to create a greater sense of danger. To see if the viewer has the balls to face the life-size sculptures as much as the small ones. It also seemed fun to see the reverse process. Instead of looking at the pieces with a feeling of superiority, some of the sculptures are now larger than the spectators.

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Since I started to follow up your work, I have come upon many ways to read it. I've come to realise, among many other things, that your work is what you could get if the devil would rewrite it the bible; I think he would reveal himself as a real lover of mankind.

Most artists and comedians who show violence and utter stupidity, actually love people and life very much, but they simply chose to tell people the ugly truth instead of giving them a false peace of mind. We can think of Hieronymus Bosch, South Park, and lots of others: when you see their work, you just know they're not misanthropic but, on the contrary, pure humanists. I feel this in your work too. You seem to tell people: don't be so stupid, think and act for yourself. And that includes denying all ideology, accepting the critical autonomy of the individual as the only standard, and holding up a mirror before people, which is a key aspect of western humanism. Do you see yourself that way, as a humanist?

The truth is that the question seems so applicable that I have little more to add. But yes, I would really like to consider myself a humanist. Anyway, you might think it is a bit arrogant for me to go and give advice to humanity. But, the process is: first I work on, and develop, ideas that concern me. Issues that arise in conversations (that's why having a good conversation with someone is so important to me). Sometimes the best ideas can occur in a conversation in a darkened bar at night. Returning to the particular subject of the process: I pick up the issues that concern me and I twist them, put them through filters, you could almost say I like ridiculing them a little (humour is an important and very serious weapon) and then I spit them out onto the world. I return them, and I abandon them. This would be a simple process of auto-psychanalysis if I didn't use symbols that are, or that I pretend to be, universal. Here I have to say something about Nietzsche. I love how this guy does philosophy based on his own life. I'm especially fascinated with his period in Turin, shortly before he went crazy. Nietzsche is screaming at us to be independent. To think frankly, free from influences, and here he connects with Eastern, much older, philosophies whose purpose it is to free the mind of ideas that are either self-imposed or imposed by others or society etc. Enough digressions, back to the question. What I want to do, starting from my own concerns, is to address them and then relate these findings back to the audience. I'm not necessarily interested in making autonomous artworks as such, unless they actually engage in dialogue and influence the viewer. My representational code is such that I run the risk that some people might think that I'm simply taking pleasure in showing strange things. This demonstrates a resistance to the realisation that the world is strange.

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In that respect, victims, guilt, and violence are a recurring aspect in your work: the nephews, the pablito, blow it all up. How come?

Violence is indeed an important issue in my work. And, as you so aptly and accurately put it, I focus on the victims. Curiously, few people have noticed this until now. Violence is expressed through the victims. For example, one of the series I'm developing right now, "Catholic children", is based on how the Catholic iconography is largely based on suffering. After all, Jesus Christ ends up being killed after being horribly tortured. Then we find that it is this very torture that provokes veneration. And we also find that the sacrifice of Jesus was made for us. This, in itself, is already an accusation of guilt. No one less than God was tortured and killed for us. On the basis of this horror, I wanted to show in an obvious way that what is worshiped is people being tortured. This is why I turned them into children, to see if, this way, people would change their way of looking at it. I would like it, but I don't know if this is going to cause that change in anyone.

In fact, the series with the tattoos also addresses this. They are armed with large knives, which turns them, to some extent, into physically dangerous works. I have to say that I've incurred numerous injuries working on them in the studio. I can show you photos in which I'm practically bleeding like a Christ after having cut myself with one of the knives because I was distracted. In this series, we could say that they're not victims; they even seem ready to attack the viewer. With the other works, Pablito, Nephew and others, I want it to be the viewer who appears to

have attacked them. If you look closely, they often look terrified at the viewer, always from below. Here, it is the viewer who is the torturer. With the tattoo works, the viewer can become the tortured.

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Why did you include your own self-portrait in the series?

First because I always work with my immediate environment. I have used my parents, my nephews, friends etc, and I too have become a research subject. Also because, although at first this may seem contradictory, I think my own face is the one most free of connotations, in the sense that it can bring the viewer to make interpretations such as: if this guy is representing fanatics and uses his uncle's face, it must be because he wants to make clear to us that his uncle is a fanatic. So I use my own face as the most anonymous and aseptically face I could come up with. Yet it is complicated because I would be lying if I said that I'm not talking about myself. The truth is that I try to keep the process as controlled as possible, but sometimes it gets out of hand. It seems to have a life of its own and sometimes I have to "tie it short" (this is a typical Spanish phrase. It refers to tying a short rope to a horse when it has run away or is difficult to master; I'm not sure if there will be a translation for this). I have always represented myself in a deformed manner, dwarf-like, like a monster sometimes. In the tattoo series, it is the first time I do so without any distortions.

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About your self portrait, on closer examination it seems to hint at the idea of authorship as it was often considered in the Middle Ages: a kind of service. Which social role do you see for yourself as an artist? What is your place? I ask you because I know that in Spain some of your works have met with hostility from the authorities.

True, some installations and works have caused problems, let's say. Particularly the installation "Diorama de abducción". I'll explain to sketch the context. I was invited by Commissioner Peio Hernández to participate in the exhibition "Esculturismo", which approached the world of sculpture from a critical and bitingly humorous point of view. I made this installation called "Diorama de abducción". It presents a forest, recreated in the space, and at the back of the trees we see a very strong light that almost hurts the eyes. And in the middle of a central path, there are two figures, which at first we see from behind, who seem to walk toward the light. Upon approaching, it appears that the two characters look very much like to mayor of Madrid and the governor of the Region of Madrid. (Both now occupy other positions). First, the commissioner and I hid from the organization the fact that the sculptures would be portraits of politicians, because otherwise they would never have allowed me to do the installation. In fact, during the assembly, I covered the faces with two animal masks. Pig and fox. These masks were removed five minutes before the press visit. There was a terrible commotion. The official opening was cancelled. The exhibition was kept out of the press, and many critics related to the party harshly criticized it. This was mainly because the exhibition took place in the official hall of the Community of Madrid, with the support of the governor's office. I had introduced a virus and they didn't know how to get rid of it. Photos of the work were taken out of the catalogue. But, best of all, the community of Madrid had signed to purchase a work of mine for its collection yet the gallery received a letter in which some deputy was saying that Madrid didn't want any work of mine and that I was henceforth a persona non grata in the city. Why did I do this? I feel a profound contempt for politicians in general and for the Spanish in particular. They are clumsy, corrupt, disinterested, uneducated, and much more. These two politicians, the mayor and the governor created a lamentable spectacle of continuous fighting (even if they were both of the same party). It was of schoolyard level, they were continuously pulling dirty tricks on each other, thereby clearly demonstrating that a politician only cares about himself. The political spectacle was, as I say, embarrassing, insulting. But my installation wasn't. It simply showed them walking through a forest toward a light. The politicians' aides did their best to keep them from seeing or finding out about this installation. And I was amused to see how people in the art world yielded to the abuse I was subjugated to by being declared persona non grata. As if some fucking deputy could just declare anyone in any place a persona non grata. What were these assholes thinking? I wonder many times. The politicians have come to believe that they are leaders when actually they are servants, administrators at most. As an artist it is my duty, for example, to permanently take the piss out of them. In my view, the artist is the one most removed from the production of beautiful objects for bourgeois consumption. In any case, he has to make fucking horrible and frightening objects that are insulting to the softened minds. A nasty work is much more useful than a stupidly beautiful work. Some may think, "The Mystic Lamb by Van Eyck is a very beautiful work and is one of the pinnacles of world art." True, it looks beautiful, but what I see in it, instead of salvation, is a deep anguish. A terrible father-god presiding over a humanity that follows the leader of the pack like a flock. For me, this is what makes it one of the masterpieces of world art. And if, indeed, as you say, the inclusion of my self-portrait is a kind of signature, I couldn't have said it better.

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What are the initials on your body in your self-portrait? I mean on the back in the red disc and on your arms?

It's a symbolism that I use very often and that can be found in several places, usually more hidden in this case. But I prefer not to explain, at least not here, it is too weird!

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You seem to use different tattoo styles throughout the series. Which ones, and why these?

I have used tattoos used by the mafia groups that interested me most for this project. The Japanese and Russian Mafia, the Maras (whose origin is Salvadoran, but it is widespread, Salvatruchana, Latin Kings ...), prisoners (this is very complex because it varies so much according to the place and the prison) neo-Nazis, Narco Satanics, etc.. I've used these groups because they are marginal groups. This means that when someone adopts a tattoo from a criminal group, they are turning away from society. It is a statement that there is no going back on their intention of being a public enemy. I studied their iconography, their symbols, and codes and then I played with it.

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And on some sculptures you seem to have invented a personal style, based on the Flemish old masters. I suppose trying to break away from the routine isn't the only reason?

Actually this type of iconography already existed in some of the styles that I have listed above. But it's true that sometimes I've had to take things to the extreme to create a new one. What happens is that I like to create my own codes and also, indeed, once I had used many of them, I began to feel limited. On the other hand, I wanted to get away from the idea that this is some kind of representation of the existing tattoo catalogue. I've been faithful to the styles, but only as a starting point. From there I went wherever I wanted. In complete freedom. And, indeed, one of those in which I felt more at ease was the one in which I used the iconography of the old Flemish Masters. Instead of being mere representations of tattoos, I see these pieces more as painted ceramics. It is a strange comparison but in my mind it is what fits best.

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Roberto has yet another style, again different from the rest. What's it with him?

This is a Khmer tattoo or Yantra. It is originally from Thailand and is done in sacred temples to people who have committed deplorable acts, or as protection against bullets etc. Mainly criminals. Here I have basically used texts in a language that resembles Sanskrit but that was entirely made up. In all these pieces, there is much play with the iconography and they express a great sense of humour as well.