

# THE GENTLEMAN'S JOURNAL



## THE PLASTICINE MAN

*Henry Hudson has become one of the UK's most sought-after artists by creating sublime works of art with a modelling clay; the same material loved by children and animation companies the world over...*

Words by *FLORA ALEXANDRA OGILVY*

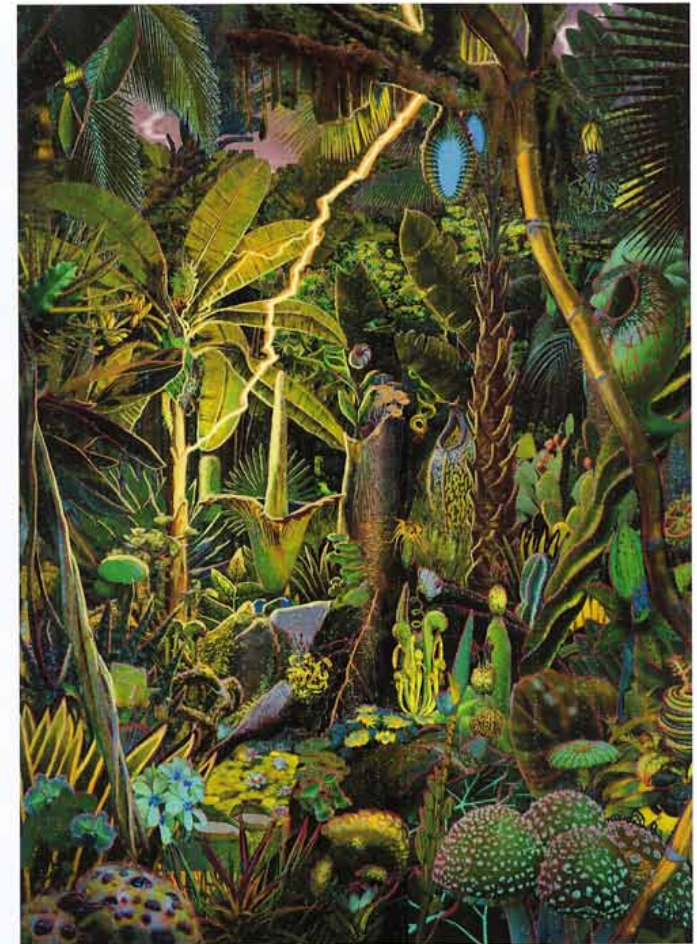
**'H**enry, do what you like mate!' It's on this pithy comment, from a liberal art teacher at his Catholic school in Yorkshire, that

Henry Hudson's life has pivoted. Now, a decade after graduating from Central St Martins, he's known for working in the unconventional medium of Plasticine and one of Britain's most sought-after artists.

Over the past few years, Hudson has exhibited at Sotheby's S2 and Christie's in London and Beijing's F2 Gallery, and caught the attention of distinguished collectors such as White Cube's Jay Jopling, photographer Mario Testino and fellow artist Marc Quinn.

Still only 33, Hudson comes from an artistic background. As the son of the sculptor Richard Hudson, his childhood was spent between the Yorkshire Dales and the bars of Soho with artists like Lucian Freud. Born into a family who, 'for centuries made a living from their hands,' one might think that art was the natural path for the young Hudson. But it took escaping from his Catholic boarding school for the Sensation: Young British Artists show in 1997 at the Royal Academy to realise art was, 'the one place in my life where I felt comfortable.' Encouraged by his art teacher, he made his way to Central St Martins, where he started to develop the style and process he is now famous for.

We meet on a grey November morning at his spacious studio – a converted hair salon – in east London. Wearing a flowing corduroy suit, Hudson nibbles organic granola as he shows me round and explains how his 'greatest indulgence is being an artist.' The first thing that strikes you on entering his space is



*Jungle Composition From 14:00 - 16:00 hours, 2015*

the unmistakable smell... not of oil paint, clay or any of the other more traditional art materials, but of Plasticine, an aroma that transports you back to childhood. And inside the studio, the atmosphere is subdued as assistants work diligently on projects amidst an impressive collection of art books and cacti.

So where did the fascination with Plasticine come from? Hudson explains that when he was at St Martins, he went to buy materials for an expressionist piece, but could only afford the children's modelling clay. Evidently still intoxicated by the memory, he describes 'smelling and using my hands with the Plasticine, thinking it was insane because I had such freedom.'

As we tour the studio, it is clear that his textured paintings don't happen overnight: 'they're laboured, loved and there is both a madness and intensity to them.' To achieve the sculptural quality, the clay is mixed and layered onto boards using body parts to define the lines and expressions. From the initial drawings to the impasto-ing of the Plasticine, Henry maintains the contemporary relevance of his laborious technique. 'It all starts with the hand,' he says. 'As much as we develop technology, people will always want the mystery, which only comes via the hand.'





The Rise and Fall of  
Young Sen, Plate 6:  
The After Party, 2014

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THE UNMISTAKABLE SMELL  
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Ironically, this poses something of a problem in a world that communicates digitally: it is very hard to convey the power of his work with a digital image. As Hudson says, 'collectors see my work online, but only understand the complexity of the process when they visit the studio and are like "f\*\*\* me!"'

Hudson's position within the contemporary art market was cemented by his series *The Rise and Fall of Young Sen* at Sotheby's S2 last year. Re-interpreting William Hogarth's 18th-century narrative *A Rake's Progress*, it chronicled the moral decline of a Chinese boy in the West. Despite the artist's eccentricities, there was a solemnity, which surfaced as Henry discussed his contemptuous views on contemporary society.

Known for his cutting-edge shows, the influential collector Carl Kostyal will present Hudson's next exhibition at his Savile Row gallery ahead of the *Jungle Series* opening at Sotheby's S2 gallery in New York. Having witnessed the construction of this rather psychedelic series, there's no doubt that it draws from the artist's travels and experimentation with the hallucinogenic brew ayahuasca which followed Hudson's disappearance after the last exhibition, 'to blow off steam' as he puts it.

Meanwhile, Hudson has other strings to his artistic bow. His experimental Woodburytype, a form of 'constructed' photograph developed in the 19th century, made its debut on TJ Boulting's stand at Art Basel, Miami, but it's been updated in collaboration with a Spanish artist who works with Anish Kapoor and Grayson Perry: Connecting with the earliest form of photography, these delectable objects are constructed from gelatine, reflecting his appreciation of the, 'playfulness and freedom to express yourself in cooking, which is more instantaneous than art.'

Hudson runs something of a Renaissance studio model, using assistants to help with the labour-intensive parts of the process. Other artists like Kapoor, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst have







Woodburytype Print of Study Plate 6, 2015

been criticised for this 'factory' approach, but Hudson believes they are an important part of the process: 'I tell them to ensure their identity is in the art... up to a point. That openness and an ability to breathe is like a plant you nurture, you have to give it that sense of freedom. It's an organic thing, because if you let your garden grow, then people will sit in it.'

As one of the assistants, Pierre, tediously applies layers of black Plasticine, a perceptive Henry swoops in to take over and relieve him from the monotony. When assistants set aside their own creative ambition to support an established artist, it is rare to find a remarkably positive, collaborative atmosphere.

'We're not banging out stupid little abstract paintings,' declares an impassioned Hudson. 'These works we make are made beautiful by blood and sweat.'

Throughout our meeting, barely a word is uttered without Hudson leaping up to seek out visual stimulation like the secret vault of Plasticine, which makes his imagination a physical reality. Amidst the rainbow of blocks I glimpse some metallic paper. I think this might be the beginning of a new direction, but it's nothing more than a stowaway chocolate bar, which so perfectly captures the magic of Henry's studio: a place where the work is tough, but there's always room for a little indulgence.

And what about being based in London? Despite being British, Hudson says he's frustrated with the city's art scene. 'We're a\*\*\*\*\*s to each other and we like to put each other down before we've begun,' he laments, before adding he's been 'given f\*\*\* all support by London.' Despite that, he says, he

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keeps growing stronger all the time and the work keeps getting better, which is testament to his defiant character.

Also evident is that Hudson is a natural self-publicist. Known for wearing his corduroy suits and the wild Pop Art ensembles of artist Philip Colbert, his sartorial flare is difficult to ignore. However, it could be argued that it's the subtleties of his idiosyncratic character, which so beguiles his followers. What's more, a flick through his Instagram reveals an openness, which reflects his inability to live by his sculptor father's contrasting belief that, 'if you can be alone, it's a very good quality to have.'

Musing once again on the laborious process he has developed he says, 'Yes, I'm into the idea that a great work of art can take seconds, but I'm also a great believer in making a laboured work that can be looked at with admiration, delicacy and drama.'

Despite some impressive publicity, something tells me that fame and fortune hold little value for Hudson. He's an impassioned artist in a truly classical sense of the word: someone who is utterly consumed by the development of his work. He will no doubt always have a wilder side but his creative integrity is not to be challenged. After several hours in his studio I come to realise that the intricacy of his Plasticine paintings barely hints at his sense of discipline or the boundless imagination which so captivate his rapidly growing legion of followers. It is the combination of all these elements – process, integrity, imagination – with the theatricality of his character and his works which define him as a thoroughly modern storyteller. Expect to see a great deal more of this innovative artist.



Jungle Composition From 18:00-20:00 hours, 2015