



**Health & Beauty**

# Stuart Semple: with my 53 allergies, I'm afraid to swallow

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This is the flatline of my ECG showing where I officially died, my vital signs zeroed completely," Stuart Semple tells me, pointing to a green line that bisects his new painting, *Nut Job*. A contemporary British pop artist who has been compared to Warhol and Basquiat, Semple is collected by Sienna Miller, Lady Gaga and Debbie Harry. At 28 he is a millionaire. His canvases — which incorporate text and music lyrics — both celebrate and critique consumer culture. He has collaborated with The Prodigy, as well as designing jewellery and clothes. I'm expecting an enfant terrible with clever hair.

But in person Semple is warm and genuine as he knows all about vulnerability after a near-death experience caused by an unknown nut allergy. He officially died for several seconds. "Up until that day I was a normal kid, I went to art school, I was like everyone else ... Then I had this awful week when I had a huge allergic reaction, my tongue swelled up so big I could hardly breathe and I found myself in a hospital bed, dying."

As part of a blood transfusion he was given plasma but he had a major reaction to it. "The doctors told me there was not very much they could do." He had to say goodbye to his mother — "that's not a normal thing," he says, voice faltering. But overnight his body rallied: "I remember thinking while I remained conscious that should I survive I will really become an artist."

He's still never had a final diagnosis. "The hospital shipped me out to this university guy in an ambulance. I got some crazy list of 53 things I was allergic to — tomatoes, celery, pineapple, cucumber. But it wasn't specific enough. Yes, peanuts will probably kill you, but you're also allergic to bees, but we're not sure how much." Semple was grateful to be alive but as a result of his experience he developed phagophobia — a fear of swallowing. "It was so bad I was terrified to drink from a glass in case someone had just eaten cucumber." It became hard to trust other human beings.

The irony is the symptoms of panic are the same as an anaphylactic attack. "You feel like you're choking, your heart rate increases." At first he'd call an ambulance several times a week but refused any more medication. "My body chemistry was all over the place, the last thing I wanted was some weird drug."

Instead, Semple fuelled all his energy into painting and began exhibiting in bars and clubs. He put drawings on eBay, where they sparked a bidding war.

By then aged 21, Semple got his first solo show in London. In 2004 he made a memorial work from £10 million worth of British art destroyed in the Mornart fire. A year later he smuggled his own painting into the Saatchi Gallery, protesting at the absence of British artists in one of Saatchi's exhibitions.

But 2007 was the year he became an art superstar. For the Frieze Art Fair he filled the Truman Brewery with *Fake Plastic Love*, an exhibition of gigantic billboard-size paintings, and the show broke \$1 million sales within the first five minutes and attracted more than 10,000 visitors. The *Financial Times* declared him "The Basquiat of the Noughties".

He's still level-headed about fame. "If no one buys another painting, I don't care because I might die tomorrow."

At his studio near Islington's canal, full of books and canvases — and, incongruously, a cake stand with pink and yellow Fondant Fancies (sugar is one of the things he can eat) — he admits socialising is hard with his condition. "I feel awkward when there's a group of art dealers who want to take me out somewhere posh and they order me the God-knows-what-ever cod and I'm looking at it and thinking: I'm going to drop dead." He sticks to mashed potato and grilled fish or steak and chips, but then they bring it out with salad, "and then I'm Mr Fussy — arrogant, moaning artist. I get on a plane and I'm scared when they dish out nuts that air is going to be circulating for eight hours with nuts in it."

Semple, who has a nine-month-old son with his long-term partner, an ex-fashion model — "She came round to model for me and never left" — loves cooking for friends. "But when it comes to putting the food in my mouth I don't enjoy it at all," he says in his first interview about his swallowing phobia.



Pic: Daniel Hambury

Stuart Semple: "If no one buys another painting, I don't care because I might die tomorrow"

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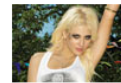
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Semple can charge thousands of pounds for a single canvas but he also wants ordinary Londoners to enjoy his work and last year released 2,000 smiley-faced helium balloons outside [Tate Modern](#) to cheer people up in the recession. In May he is working with Aubin & Wills — which is opening a clothing outlet, retro cinema and gallery space (curated by Semple) in [Shoreditch](#).

Nearly dying has given him the bravery to address taboos in his work, but would he trade fame for one day of eating normally? He pauses: "Food is still a functional thing for me. But I've ended up with this strange faith in the order of things. I can paint, I have a great family, I'm happy."

Stuart Semple's new show, *The Happy House*, is at Morton Metropolis, 41- 42 Berners Street, W1, May 6-28.

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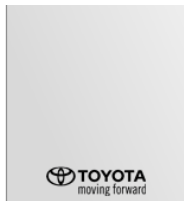
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