

# TIM NOBLE & SUE WEBSTER

## THE MAGIC OF A CURRENCY

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Shimmering fairground lightbulbs forming bold, Vegas-like sculptures illustrate the oeuvre of the artist duo Tim Noble and Sue Webster.<sup>1</sup> Light is one of the many elements the two artists shape into spectacular formations and designs. Whether as key players or antagonists, light and shadow are omnipresent in Noble and Webster's art. Opposites famously attract and Noble and Webster's body of work is designed around the concept of contrast: light and shadow, form and anti-form, high art and commerce.<sup>2</sup> The resulting attraction between the components astonishes, entertains, stimulates, and certainly provokes the viewer's mindset by fueling it with a subversive philosophy.

Since 1995, when Noble and Webster started their collaboration, light sculptures have played a central role in the duo's artistic development. Their relationship had begun nine years earlier in 1986, when they met in a Fine Art class at Nottingham Trent University. Noble recalls: "We did not visit Vegas when we were students, however the light was lit early on by the presence of the Goose Fair in Nottingham, a large energetic fairground event that took place yearly. We were fascinated by the terminology the fairground owners called their flashing lights: UFO's and dazzlers, which were reflective, coloured caps fitted over the light bulbs that dramatically enhanced the light, adding colour and intensity as well as star-spangled effects."<sup>3</sup> Illuminations have a longstanding tradition in the United Kingdom, especially in English seaside resorts, a prime example being the famous Blackpool Illuminations Festival, which was founded in 1879. The radiant lights brighten the long months of gray and rainy fall and winter.<sup>4</sup>

Building on this, Noble and Webster created their first light sculpture *Flash Painting* in 1993. It consisted

of a blank canvas surrounded by a border of white sequenced light bulbs with a chase effect. It was their rebellious comment on the then rather conceptual and austere art scene, which they opposed. They even yearned for it to explode with a big bang—or, in this case, in flashing lights so intense that they would burn the retinas of the audiences' eyes as colors began to appear on the surface of the white canvas. The work placed minimalism within the Pop Art vernacular, a first step towards their more mature light sculptures, which started to appear three years later.<sup>5</sup> Tim Noble insists: "For me, signage was seduction and entertainment. The signs are of course meant to be seen high up and at a glimpse. So, to deliberately place one in a contemplative surrounding such as an art space was confrontational. It changed the environment regardless of what people were thinking or discussing, it may have avoided delicate and contemplative discussion, but it certainly opened up a massive door in my mind."<sup>6</sup>

This fascination with the medium spurred their urge to expand their horizon beyond the familiar. The artists started studying Las Vegas, a source of exceptional illuminations and signage, by watching any and every film featuring the desert city, even venturing into black-and-white footage. "Vegas lights are extraordinary—each light canopy tries to outdo the next fighting for attention. By nature, they are highly competitive and evolved so of course we were very fascinated by them," Noble explains.<sup>7</sup>

After selling their first few works, one of them being *Toxic Schizophrenia* (1997), which is emblematic of the light sculpture series, they eventually made their pilgrimage to Las Vegas to study the city's garish illuminated signs the way other artists might

study paintings in a museum.<sup>8</sup> It was a bonanza of bright lights and lasting impressions. This visit had a deep impact that would later materialize in the pair's signature artwork series; flashing electric signs and elaborate shadow sculptures made of trash.<sup>9</sup>

A sly, defiant humor characterizes the light sculptures by Noble and Webster. The carefully chosen, symbolically charged motives speak an international language and do not require a conceptual framework to connect with their audience.<sup>10</sup> "Noble and Webster's art is obvious, colorful, dirty-mouthed, and shot through with a mania that loudly announced their presence," Linda Yablonsky states.<sup>11</sup>

Against this backdrop, the 2001 sculpture \$ (Dollar) joins the ranks of its predecessors. The dollar sign is a symbol of money, power, greed, seduction, and wealth. Its status in American Pop Art culture was immortalised in Andy Warhol's iconic dollar signs. Tim Noble elaborates: "What lies behind the mirror? The more the surface shines, the darker the space behind, the more I want to peep into the depths."<sup>12</sup>

The highly charged motif illustrates Noble and Webster's interest in plain symbol and word images and the inherent communicative power of a logo in conjunction with ostentatious light sequences.<sup>13</sup> The sculpture as a mirror might reflect the illusion of a seductive and hypnotic, yet elusive promise. It shimmers and sparkles with all the decadence and kitsch of our capitalist society, but at the same time it casts a long, dark shadow, of which the outlines are warped and the form is incalculable.

The voyeuristic urge to see both sides of the coin—or dollar sign—lures the viewers and inevitably casts a spell over them: the dazzling, dark spell of inscrutable depth.



\$ (Dollar), 2001  
204 ice white turbo reflector caps, lamps, holders, and daisy washers,  
lacquered brass, electronic light sequencer  
183 x 129.5 x 25 cm