

The background of the image is a dark, purple-toned photograph. In the foreground, there is a large, complex sculpture constructed from numerous flattened cardboard boxes, some standing upright and others leaning against each other. In the background, the silhouettes of several people are visible against a lighter, hazy sky. One person is on the left, another in the center, and a third on the right. The overall mood is somber and artistic.

TIM NOBLE & SUE WEBSTER

THEIR LIFE IN
PIECES



Made of Money (Sterling £5, £10, £20 and £50 notes), 2002
MDF, formica, perspex, 3 electric fans, slot machine mechanism, plastic tokens, light projector

Made of Money (2002) is a sculpture made of a fully transparent, squared Perspex box with a slot machine mechanism, constructed on top of a base to reach eye-level height. Inside are real £5, £10, £20, and £50 notes piled up. This is what you see during day light, as this work is a shadow piece as well, its glamor evolves when in the dark the light source projects the image on the wall and when it starts to move after inserting a specially designed coin. Three electric fans start to whirl the bank notes around and, all of a sudden, the profiles of Noble and Webster appear, radiated by the light projector—a most romantic image of two lovers kissing each other, deeply in love, where quasi-felt butterflies in their tummies seem to fly around their heads. However, it is money instead blowing around their heads, implying the first real highlight in their success story and alleging that luck or even love is a consequence of money. A shadow play, which is meant to run out of time. In fact this work seems to anticipate their major “Nihilistic Optimistic” show ten years later.

Their exceptional work is permeated by the idea of extremes, chance, opposites, and their personal lives: the unstructured becomes structured, trash turns into a collectable, the meaningless into something meaningful; it's about intention and intuition, the professional and personal, 3-D to the two dimensional and vice versa, chance to concept, the individual becoming an art object, love and hate (visible on the left and right hand of the figure in the work *Puny Undernourished Kid & Girlfriend from Hell*), art life, and “nihilistic optimistic.”

They typically throw out crude words through their works. Some titles, graffiti or tattoos are based on the titles of home made pornographic

movies. The light work *Puny Undernourished Kid & Girlfriend from Hell* from 2004 presented here is full of tattoos, cheap kitsch slogans and, at a second glance, sharp words. A clear, rebellious, direct face-off, i.e. when Noble “affectionately” calls Webster his “girlfriend from hell,” with personal moments and self-references slipping into their art.

The idea of the cartoon-like neon light goes back to an early sketch they made just after they started to collaborate in 1995. Now it has grown to a major, vivacious wall projection, a large-scale diptych of 82 parts and 9 transformers. And it recalls a variety of art movements from body art, graffiti art, Minimal Art, new media, and the conceptualism of Bruce Nauman to Pop Art culture.

Looking at the complete oeuvre of Tim Noble and Sue Webster the present work contains three important aspects: the “epiphany”¹ of their beginning to work with neon, being impressed by the spectacular signs of Las Vegas, followed by their will to make life-sized figures (this one is even over-sized), and their confidence in their straight-forward gesture and own cult of self-portrayal.

What neon and its flashiness really represents for the duo is: sexiness, suburban twilight, and the atmosphere of the underworld. This matches the subversive language visible, i.e. on the left arm of the female “Fuck Everything” or “Piss off” coming loudly out of the mouth of the male figure. This attitude is a response to any conventional way they did not feel part of. They wanted to oppose, make provocations on purpose, be outsiders, and live in a non-location. Tim Noble and Sue Webster represent the radical artist generation of the rebelling Young British Art scene in London during the '80s. In this sense it is reasonable that they felt liberated and inspired by Punk as it edges the real underground and remote from principle.

In all their opposing being their way of life and art production are surprisingly consistent. They live in “Chance” Street in their so called “Dirty House”, outside painted all in black, they dress in black, their hair is wild and free-style, Rock and Punk echoes everywhere in their life and work. And it was by chance that they stumbled upon shadow sculpture.

They had cocooned themselves in a completely darkened room, devoid of natural light, in Las Vegas, where they were making works using lights. One day they noticed their own shadows projected around the room: exact

1 Interview by Hans Ulrich Olbricht in: *Time Noble & Sue Webster, Nihilistic Optimistic*, exhib. cat., London 2012, page 91.

silhouettes of their bodies on the walls. These perfect images of themselves impressed them and this was the key situation for all following shadow art works. They are fascinated by space and transformation, so the invention of their shadow works was a welcome coincidental consequence.

From Shoreditch in London, where they live, Noble and Webster started to collect rubbish found on the street, accumulating massive objets trouvés and anything that was useful. The first art compositions were piles of recognizable everyday trash, echoes of a specific environment and human presence: “British Rubbish.”² But more and more it was their choice to use objects that are not recognizable any more. They started to break and to rearrange things. This process developed so that the physical, finished art work turned into a composition of fractured objects, challenging the viewers’ senses, like in the three shadow works *Wild Mood Swings*, *Individual*, and *Youngman* installed here. The “missing link” lends the work a certain tension and individual appeal.

This development indicated a new direction, a benchmark, a transition in their work: from accumulated found objects to really creating a sculpture from scratch. Where will this go to in future? Will the sculpture become an autonomous piece in its own right?

The three silhouettes *Wild Mood Swings*, *Individual* and *Youngman* projected on different walls and partitions populate the Nicola Erni Collection, creating a shadowy, puppetry-like atmosphere. In the darkness of the room one loses any feeling for where one is and the shadow works freeze time; one is completely liberated in the all-over room installation in the Nicola Erni Collection. In this respect, the artists’ idea of space and time is ideally shown through the shadow works, as they slow down the everyday pace of life.

These works are the largest shadow sculptures they have ever made. Each is unique and a real achievement. They form part of the series “Nihilistic Optimistic,” which the duo took over three years to create and produce, from sourcing and installing, to their technical complex finish to the works.

What else distinguishes the three pieces from other shadow works is the different starting point. Here the focus was on step ladders, as they already form a figure, and on more wooden pieces, so they collected some exciting left-over bits from the pub The Owl & Pussycat down the road. But beside the greatness and complexity of these works, what makes them real

masterpieces is the fact that they mark a reversal point in their private life, and as art is their life, these works do carry their emotion, wherefore a change is immanent. It is a coincidence that, just at their artistic and technical climax, this type of deeply personal and spirited works will probably end here.

Wild Mood Swings, *Individual* and *Youngman* tell the story: *Wild Mood Swings* from 2009–10 is the oldest shadow work in this series. It shows two full-length figures not facing each other, seated back to back. Followed by the *Individual*, which represents Webster on her own, reflecting her good feeling wearing jeans and having her hair cut, as in her early days when she was single—an individual just by herself. *Youngman*, as the last process, confirms the breaking up of the relationship and Noble’s restored self-consciousness as a young man standing up.

The figures do not gel together anymore; there is no relation between them. Webster and Noble have retuned to their own selves as single autonomous characters, full of energy for new things. At the time when the last figure was completed in 2012, Tim Noble and Sue Webster had been working together for 17 years and the title they gave this series seems to reflect the duality and dichotomy of their future personal and professional life perfectly: “Nihilistic Optimistic.” It’s their life in pieces, indeed.

Florentine Rosemeyer

2 “British Rubbish,” an exhibition of the same name held in 1996 at the Independent Art Space, London, UK.



Wild Mood Swings, 2009-10
Two wooden stepladders, discarded wood, light projector



Youngman, 2012
Wooden stepladder, discarded wood, light projector



The Individual, 2012
Wooden stepladder, discarded wood, light projector

Puny Undernourished Kid & Girlfriend from Hell, 2004
Dptych: multi-colored neons, in 82 parts,
with 9 transformers



