

UNTITLED (MIXED MEDIA) by David Foley

excerpt

TED: Mr. Creczik...

STEPHEN: Stephen.

TED: Stephen. I understand you have done me a great honor by consenting to be interviewed.

[*Pause.*]

You don't like to be interviewed?

STEPHEN: I used to do interviews. I got tired of reading words I never said coming out of a person I never was. And I decided that, in part, the fault was with me. I was trying to explain my work. It should explain itself. If it doesn't, nothing I say will help.

TED: And yet your work has often been open to misinterpretation.

STEPHEN: My work speaks in a certain vocabulary, a vocabulary that's specific to my experience. If people don't share that experience, they may not understand the work.

TED: Now that experience has been... colorful, to say the least. Just to cover a few biographical facts. You ran away from home?

STEPHEN: Yes.

TED: At...?

STEPHEN: I was sixteen.

TED: You had family trouble.

STEPHEN: My father beat me up.

TED: And you went to New York.

STEPHEN: [*impatiently reciting*] I went to New York. I lived on and off the streets for about six years—

TED: How did you support yourself?

STEPHEN: This and that. Usually hustling.

TED: Hustling?

STEPHEN: I gave blow jobs and sometimes I got fucked.

TED: [*beat; a little joke*] Do you object to being paraphrased in the press?

STEPHEN: Yes.

TED: [*a little testily*] Then this could be a very short article. [*looks at his notes*] What about drugs?

STEPHEN: I did a lot.

TED: But you stopped.

STEPHEN: I got into heroin. I saw a lot of people die. So I stopped.

TED: And how did you become an artist?

[*STEPHEN hesitates a moment, looks down, then looks up.*]

STEPHEN: Some dude gave me a camera.

TED: A friend?

STEPHEN: Got to be.

TED: And he—

STEPHEN: He's dead. Now.

[*Pause.*]

TED: So you started as a photographer.

STEPHEN: Yes.

TED: And your work, I notice, still makes use of enhanced or altered photographic imagery.

STEPHEN: Yes. I'm never content, though, with the simple photograph. A photograph is deceptive in its very accuracy. It can also be endlessly reproduced, each reproduction lessening its value in the daily stream of images. I use the photograph as the basis for work that is unique, three-dimensional, and particular to the moment of its creation.

TED: Yes. Now, getting to your work, what's made it most—notorious, perhaps—is your use of highly graphic, highly sexual, some might say pornographic imagery. What would you say, for instance, to refute the charge of pornography?

STEPHEN: I think my work is pornographic.

TED: [*beat*] It is?

STEPHEN: As far as I understand what that word means.

TED: Most people take it to refer to explicit sexual content without accompanying artistic, social or scientific merit.

STEPHEN: But that's such bullshit. What does that mean anyway? Artistic, social, or scientific merit? They're just arbitrary labels. When people talk about pornography, what they're really referring to is a sub-culture of sexual imagery in which a whole range of power relationships are portrayed which are not openly acknowledged by mainstream culture but which exist nevertheless. What disturbs people is that the imagery is uncontrolled and therefore dangerous. It doesn't recognize artificial boundaries like artistic or scientific merit. My work makes use of this imagery.

TED: And is therefore pornographic.

STEPHEN: Yes.

TED: Hm. [*pause*] Let's take an example. One of your most—striking—pieces is simply a very tight closeup of a woman's—sexual organs. The only other objects visible in the picture are two hands pushing apart the woman's thighs. Some might call this exploitative.

STEPHEN: So would I.

TED: You would?

STEPHEN: In this country a woman's value is reduced to her cunt. That's the message of Playboy and Penthouse. That's the message of your friendly neighborhood rapist. That's the message of the latest anti-abortion ruling handed down by a federal judge. That's how sexual power is structured in this country and that's how it appears in my work. I can't help that. I don't work in a vacuum.

TED: But you might argue that you're illustrating the condition of women rather than exploiting it.

STEPHEN: That's another artificial distinction.

TED: So you would say—

STEPHEN: On the other hand, I find some of the reaction to that piece really hateful and hypocritical. It's just a cunt for Christ's sake. And those are just hands. There's nothing inherently ugly or exploitative about that. The exploitation is in the viewer, who knows—so deeply they don't even know they know it—that sexual—or any—relationships are inherently exploitative in a country that exists and prospers by exploitation.

[*Pause.*]

TED: Hm. Mr. Crezick...

STEPHEN: Stephen.

TED: Stephen. We haven't yet discussed your... illness. [*Pauses expectantly.*
STEPHEN says nothing.] You have AIDS.

STEPHEN: Yes.

TED: How does that affect the type of work you're producing now?

STEPHEN: [*thinks a moment*] In the last ten years I've seen—oh, I'd say roughly—forty of my friends die horrible, painful, pointless deaths, and at the same time I've watched the government stand back and let it happen with almost perfect indifference. That can't help but affect me. And knowing that I'll soon be another corpse thrown on a pile that is now more than two hundred thousand deep and getting deeper every day fuels a bitter hopeless rage that infuses my work even when it's not specifically about AIDS. At the same time I can't separate AIDS from my experience of this country as a whole. I'm not sure you should either. I wouldn't get too cozy if I were you. You can sit there and talk comfortably about my "illness," as if it were a thing separate from yourself, but the existing powers in this country are infinitely malignant. You are not safe. Look at the environment. The ozone layer is disappearing at an incredibly rapid rate and the people in charge are basically saying wear wide hats and lots of sunscreen. The amount of toxins being poured into the air and water is several hundred times what it was at the dawn of so-called environmental consciousness. Tumors and melanomas are blooming like dandelions all over this toxic wasteland of a nation and unheard of diseases of blood and skin and bone are killing people off in record numbers. I am your fate. You cannot separate yourself from me.