

Part artist, part maker and part educator, Hans Stofer remains the consummate provocateur. And his new collection of work seems destined once again to divide its audience, explains Teleri Lloyd-Jones. Portrait by Philip Sinden

For those who know him, it will be unsurprising to hear that Hans Stofer's whereabouts can't be found on a map – or anyway on Googlemaps. At 11 o'clock I'm meant to be outside his studio in Camberwell, but I've been directed, erroneously, into the heart of Brixton. Some time later, having navigated my way out of this cartographic blackspot, I'm apologising as he kindly soothes my fluster by suggesting that there may indeed be two distant places with the same postcode. Perhaps only in Stofer's world can two places be one and the same.

A provocative force in jewellery and metalwork since the early 90s, he has worked in public collections at the V&A and the Crafts Council, and has long been part of the educational establishment, as head of programme for Goldsmithing, Silver-smithing, Metalwork & Jewellery at the Royal College of Art. Yet he continues to keep his own practice in agitated motion, in recent years moving away from the language of jewellery and metal into installation work, sculpture and painting.

This March he presents a new direction with a series called *String Theory*, at Brick Lane's Gallery

S O. Its kernel emerged last year, when he experienced something of a block. 'I didn't have any ideas. I've never been in that position before, I was panicking,' he tells me. 'I really missed something, like something had been cut off. What worried me wasn't that I didn't have any ideas but that I'd lost interest.'

He gave himself a 'mental sabbatical': no pressure to do anything. And it felt good. One evening, driving from his south London studio, he noticed that the car in front had a bundle of belongings, mattress and all, tied with string onto its roof. 'It left something in my head, I let it grow.' So now I'm standing in his studio gazing at bundles of things bound together in webs of string. These make up *String Theory*, absurd and interesting in equal measure, as so much of Stofer's work is.

Domestic objects – shoes, books, bricks, boxes, knives – are tied up in a suspension of lost property. While these still-life accumulations offer us stories, connections between each object, it is really the process that's intriguing. As a project to rekindle Stofer's creativity, *String Theory* is, in

essence, a series of focused tasks, a self-contained set of rules. Once he's decided on the arrangement of things (which are all his own belongings), he takes a photograph, and dismantles the pile. After cutting the all-important correct length of string, he starts again from the top, recreating the selected form in a kind of wrapped stasis: 'I don't shape anymore, I organise, I construct... Once you start, you have to keep going. It's not like other processes... You have to give it everything.' He explains how skill is central as a component of this new work, and though it might be stretching it to think of this as hard-won craft, there is undoubtedly a process at play, a discovery of material and rule that he must negotiate.

There are traits here that carry through from his jewellery-based pieces; most noticeably his love of everyday objects. Previously we've been treated to work made with plug chains or chicken wishbones, many other similarly unexpected materials inserted into the lexicon of jewellery. 'The notion of function was important at that point. But I wanted to make objects that when

Opposite: Hans Stofer in his studio
Below: *Welcome to my world*, mixed media, 2013

HOW LONG IS A PIECE OF STRING?





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Reebok
Reebok

THIS WAY UP
reebok

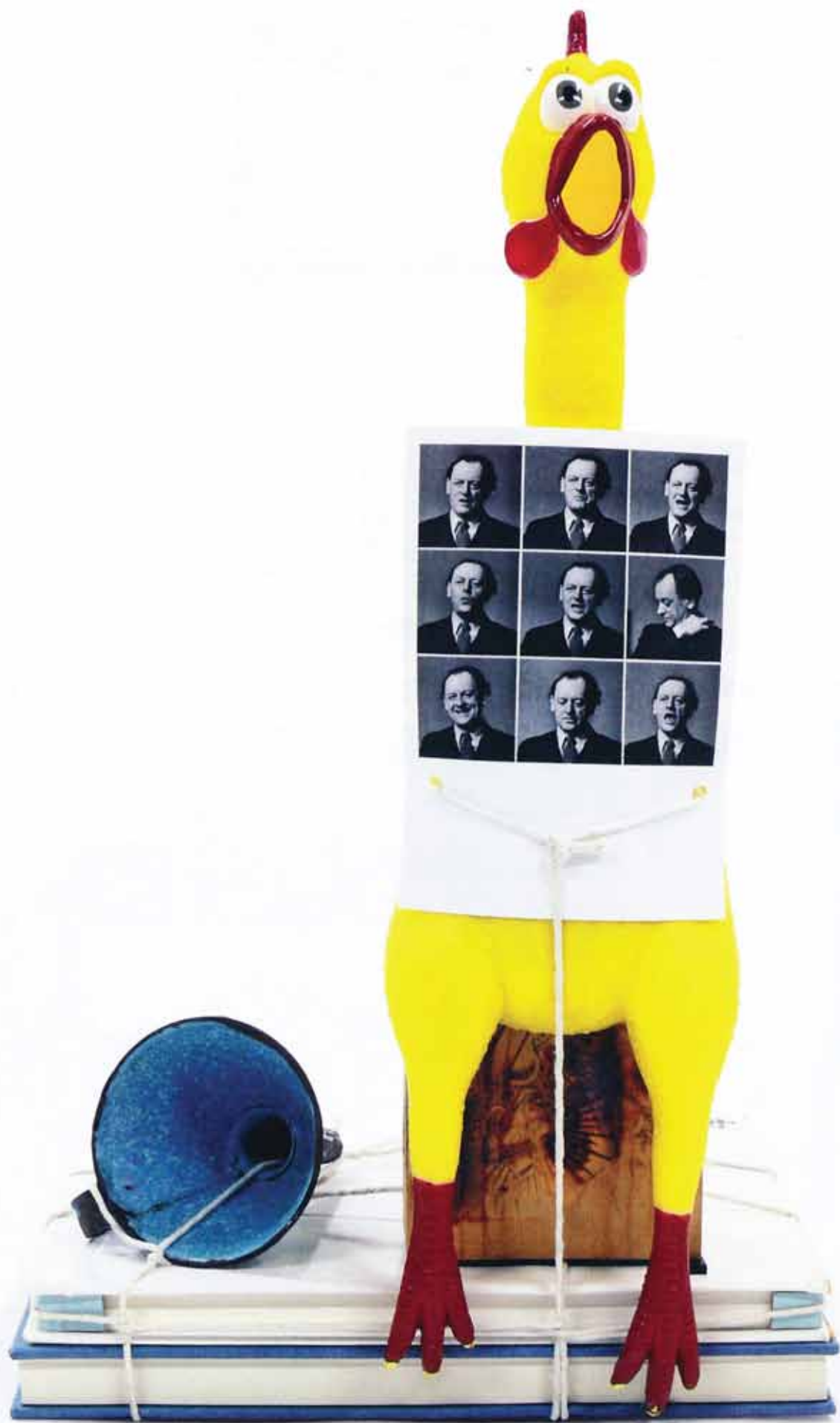
ion's
Paint



'I didn't have any ideas. I've never been in that position before, I was panicking'



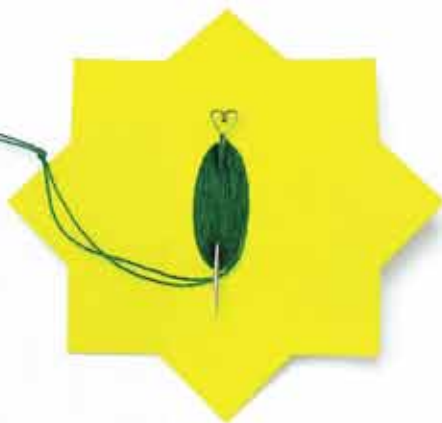
Right: *String Theory No.4*
Opposite, clockwise from
top left: *String Theory*
No.14; String Theory No.3;
String Theory No.9; String
Theory No.7. All works
are mixed media, 2013



they weren't in use had their own existence. All objects have that, down time, up time. What's interesting now, is that they have no function at all.' With his jewellery work, Stofer is toying with the traditions of display and preciousness. So is the notion of the precious totally rejected for *String Theory*? 'No, it's the other way around, I think everything is precious. Value is constructed, judgements go up and down. I say everything belongs, everything is valuable.'

Stofer's work has always been half-serious, tongue routinely firmly in cheek. His studio is in part of a church (a fact he obviously enjoys), and on the walls are portraits of Bob Dylan and Lucian Freud. In conversation he is thoughtful, patient and sincere, but with the distinct unpredictability of the well-meaning troublemaker. 'You want to rattle the boundaries of perceptions for people,' he explains. 'If people like it, maybe that's unsettling too... You can instantly understand *String Theory*, you might not like it, but you can understand it.' He is content that *String Theory* may not be a crowd-pleaser.

There is plenty of surrealism and humour in this project but resourcefulness too. As the artist's father used to say: 'All a proper boy needs is a ball of string and a pen-knife in his pocket.' This is Stofer's art for himself, one not dependent on tooling or material, or on other people. He works in his studio late into the evening when no



shops are open, and looks to what he already has around him. 'I like it. I'm surrounded by people every day. I love people and I love conversation, but in the evening I know nobody's going to come, I'm on my own. It's the space that I love the most and that I protect the most.'

This protected space of freedom and creativity hasn't always been there for him. He left school (in Switzerland) 'not knowing anything', and trained in precision engineering, focusing on electronics for military navigation. After four years, he left college and did various jobs, working on irrigation systems in Israel, labouring and teaching at engineering college. Looking to change career direction, he applied to study painting at the Fachhochschule für Gestaltung in Zurich – but instead was offered a place on the jewellery and design course. The experience of art school left him feeling liberated; moving to England in the late 80s, he set up his studio and started to make a name for himself with his wire constructions. In the 90s, he was teaching at Camberwell alongside Simone ten Hompel and Richard Slee, an enviable gang of craft mischief-makers.

Back in the Camberwell studio in the present day, Stofer points to all the boxes on the mezzanine filled with older work. Has *String Theory*, with its process of sorting and gathering, provoked a walk down memory lane? 'I've come to a point where I don't want to make more things

With Hans, when you ask him a question, you never get what you think you will get



Top to bottom: *Moth*, moth, glass, steel, safety pin, 2002; *Passion - Pins*, sewing needle, thread, 2006; *Off my Trolley*, diverse materials, 2009

– instead, I'm bringing together what I've already got. I'm making less in a way. It's not looking back, it's rediscovering things.' Would he consider a retrospective in the near future? In his inimitable, off-kilter way, he explains an idea for a show in which he remakes his work again, but from memory, as a kind of a recall game.

'With Hans, when you ask him a question,' says Felix Flury, founder of Gallery S O, 'you never get what you think you will get, it's always something else. That's quite interesting. It widens your range of questions.' S O is a Swiss gallery with an outpost in East London showing work by (among others) Otto Künzli, Michael Rowe, P. E. Lang and Bernhard Schobinger. Flury first met Stofer when he was studying at the RCA, where Stofer was on the staff. Sharing a nationality, the two became friends, and since setting up S O in 2003 in Solothurn, Flury has turned Stofer into a regular on the exhibition schedule.

A professor at the RCA since 2006, Stofer is placed at the centre of the education of a generation of makers. 'I find it still amazing and exciting... In our culture, everything is unitised and accountable. There's a landscape out there of money, funding and responsibility – so in the time they have with us they can allow themselves to go to spaces they wouldn't normally allow themselves to go,' he says, before adding: 'There's no killing though.' It's easy to see why he's taken to



education, with his winning combination of the permissive and the interrogative.

A retrospective made up of newly made things? A studio that you won't find on a map? This is the world of Hans Stofer and it isn't for everyone, but just 10 minutes in and you already see things a little differently.

Last year, on the eve of his students' graduate show, Stofer wrote this poem for them on the course website (gsmj2013.com):

*'Dear comrades
This is not the end
Nor is it finished
Bringing something to a conclusion
marks a new beginning
It is now your mission
to ensure not let the flame go out [sic]
Because making is an affirmation that we exist
You are the master of your destiny
No doubt about it
And the ambassadors for independent thinking
This is not the end but the beginning
Just take nothing for granted'*

Bravo.

'String Theory' shows at Gallery S O, 92 Brick Lane, London E1 6RL, from 7 March – 20 April 2014. www.galleryso.com

s always something else. That's quite interesting. It widens your range of questions'



Clockwise from above:
Power of Metal, silver,
screws, nails; *Pipe-Dream*,
copper, iron, plastic; *I have
not got a clue*, bulb, iron,
synthetic stone. All 2010