



MARK LEBON

A STORY ABOUT A HOUSE
BY CARMEN HALL & FRANK LEBON



apartamento - London



CRUNCH

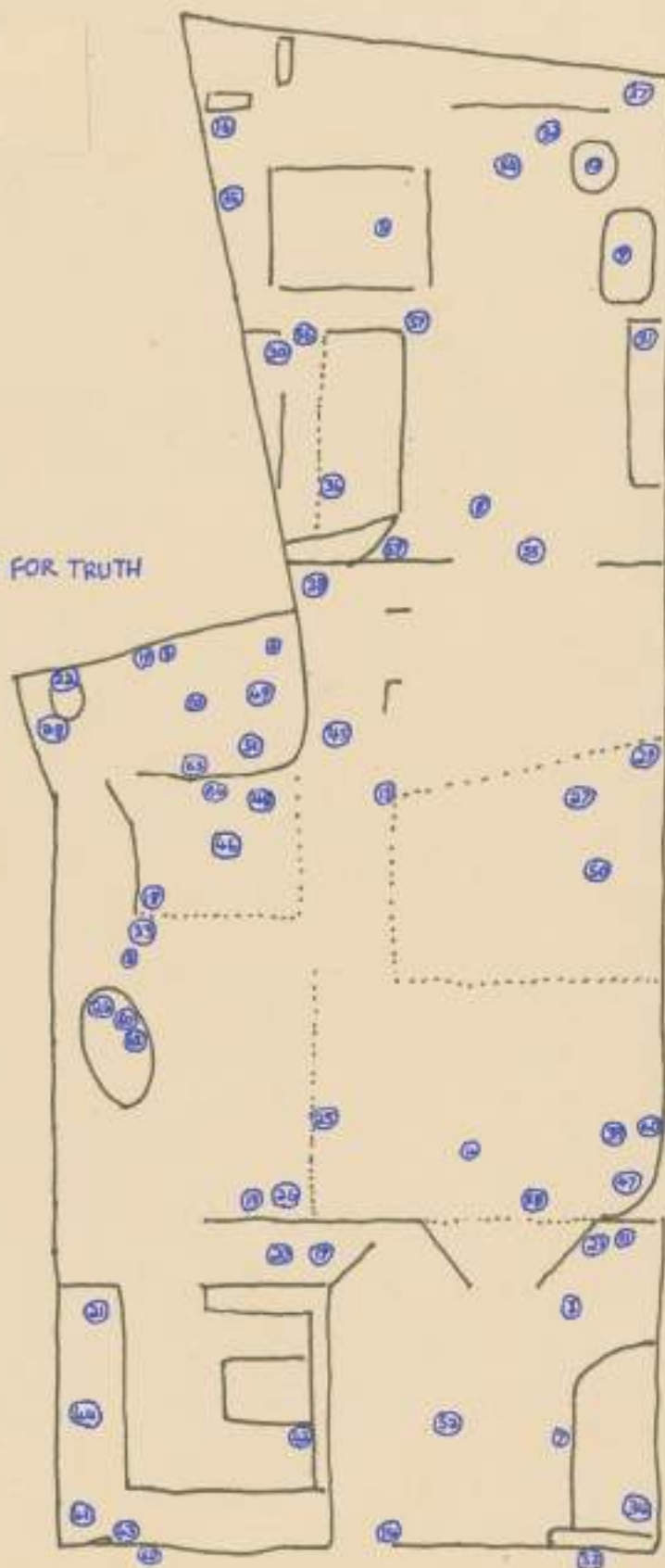
OR

THE GOOD TEMPLE FOR TRUTH

DRAWN

FROM

MEMORY



In 1984 Mark Lebon bought a parking lot. It was expensive for what it was. He was 26 years old and the plot of land was afforded by the strange weight of an inheritance. His mother had died and his first son, Tyrone, was turning four. Working as a photographer, fashion agent, and director, as well as running his production company, Crunch, he planned for the place to be his new office, home, and studio. As an executive producer, training mostly inexperienced photographers and directors, he made Crunch's landscape synonymous with the nurturing of community, amid synchronised mayhem within the overlapping worlds of fashion and art.

Crunch the company, named after the biting noise of a biscuit, has remained the property's namesake long after Mark's production days. His work life was, and still is, barely distinguishable from his personal life. Mark formally represented two of his friends, the designer Christopher Nemeth and the stylist Judy Blame. The three of them later became a recognised part of a design studio and shop in Dalston that was ironically named The House of Beauty and Culture (HOBAC)—retrospectively referred to as something like a revolutionary creative movement. At the time it was just what they were up to. Work by furniture makers Fric and Frack (Alan Macdonald and Fritz Soloman) and the artist Dave Baby (photo 35, 38), also contributors to HOBAC, is integral to Crunch's unusual corners of wooden features and subtle avant-garde. Mark has been interviewed plenty of times about HOBAC, about his work with *The Face* and *i-D* magazines and his portraits of people like Madonna and Boy George. It's less common for him to discuss what he really cares about: his family.

Sometime around 1995, Mark moved into Crunch as a single parent with his second son, Frank. Living there properly for the first time, Mark didn't mind that the place had no heat and a leaking roof. Frank was two years old. Eventually they did get a wood burner (photo 12), and in the early 2000s, after one of many refurbishments, Dave Baby renamed Crunch 'The Good Temple for Truth'. Mark added 'Love, Lust, Life + Lies'. He knew the place had new meaning for him, and it is usual for Mark to take note of and title new or important eras in his life. His home is a museum of metaphors for his life's theories, mistakes, and abundance of love. Frank and Tyrone, both of whose work heavily references their dad's aesthetic, have taken parts of Crunch to their homes. Frank used refurbished wood from Mark's collection to build a customised bedframe. Tyrone recently asked his dad to build his flat a new bathroom sink, and Mark obliged with the same kind of energy he puts into a music video, or a perfectly soft-boiled egg.

How did Tyrone's sink work out?
It felt like a bit of a disaster,
but little bits of disaster are
those little things that sort of
define my creativity, my aesthetic.

You don't like the sink you made
him?

No, not really. I'm a bit
frustrated by it. But there's
no problem a bit of time won't
resolve.

So you don't like how it turned out
but think it'll wear nicely? Will
the way it looks change with time?
No, but one's opinion of it might.

That's true, and I think it takes a
lot of confidence to step away like
that. Were your parents artistic?
They definitely appreciated the
arts; they definitely appreciated
creativity. They would have wanted
us to be artistic.

And your dad was a plastic surgeon.
Yes, my dad was a cosmetic surgeon.

Did that affect your perception of
beauty?

I don't think it did. No, it didn't
affect it. I mean, right up to the
age of 35 I was questioning my own
perception of beauty. I couldn't
really put my finger on what I felt
made something beautiful. I still
can't, actually.

You have 'Strength is Bewty' carved
into your wall at home. Is that a
conclusion you've come to (photo 45)?
No, that was Fritz who thought
that, and I've actually come to
believe there's a lot more beauty
in powerlessness. There's a sort
of vulnerability in surrendering
to the energies of the world. Less
arrogance. People come together in
weakness; I don't think they come
together in strength. So that was
something I enjoyed disagreeing with
when I looked at it, however many
years ago, while I was reconsidering
how beauty made you feel.

Did Fritz give that to you?
Yeah. That woodware, it's on a
Kentucky Fried Chicken poster.
There are quite a few bits of
Kentucky Fried Chicken posters, all
on ply, that have been incorporated
in what Fritz built in the back
room. That was just a little
offcut.

What else did they design around
your house?

That ashtray (photo 4) is by Fric
and Frack, and when Fritz split
up from Alan, who is Frac, I gave
Fritz his first bit of work to do,
which was to build the back. He
created the most amazing wooden
environment, with this unique
swinging bed and walk-in wardrobe.

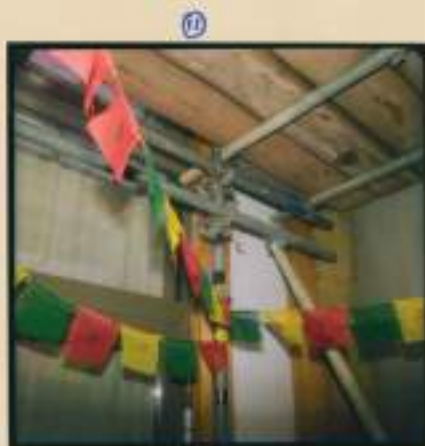
Did you have a lot of money to pay
him?

No, I didn't. But it was, you
know—I only paid him a thousand
quid. And it was just like, he did
all this work. He lived there for
a month. I paid materials on top.
He gifted me two ashtrays and two
chairs, as well. There are only a
couple of existing environments
that he created that are still
around. Sadly, he died from AIDS.

He also did that carving of
Tyrone's name (photo 56). Now that
back area, the Fritz environment,
is the part that you rent out,
right? And your own bed is the
glass box above your studio area
(photo 48). How did that happen?
That was just my idea of how to
make use of the space and monetise
the latest build I did, so that I
could rent out as much of it as
possible. I've moved to the country
to start working on a publication
about my relationship with Judy
Blame and Chris Nemeth, so it was
designed through necessity.

Kind of funny that what ended up
making sense was putting your bed
directly on top of your desk.
It is a metaphor for my entire





life. Just a happy accident, you know. Which is also a metaphor for my life. I do embrace uncertainty and chance. I've embraced it in all of my creative work simply because I was absolutely crap at controlling things. So I had to become the master of out of control-ness, rather than of in control-ness, because it just frustrated me.

What was your house like growing up?

My home?

Yeah.

Not Crunch?

No, like, growing up, your house as a kid.

My home, wow. I have only two bedrooms that I remember. One was up to the age of seven that I shared with my brother, and it was in a beautiful '50s house with a bombed-out ruin next door. It was a bit of London that suffered in the bombs. I don't have many memories there. Birthday parties and parents arguing. And then in Kensington where, again, I shared a bedroom with my brother. After that I lived at my dad's for a bit in Weymouth Street, which is where doctors hung out, and that was a bit of an extraordinary existence in a five-storey house that I had all to myself as a teenager.

Why did you have it to yourself? Because my dad had moved out and gone into semi-retirement.

So you had his huge place to yourself.

A big house, yeah. Five storeys. With a drugs cabinet and operating theatres on the top floor and in the basement.

Wow. Lucky kid.

It was a bit disconcerting. The parties and the popularity. On the first floor there was this suite of

two bedrooms, this marble bathroom, and this mirrored changing room that was quite luxurious. I had the bedroom, not the master bedroom, but the other bedroom, with its own en-suite bathroom.

Did you have a hunger for being normal or being down to earth? Like owning only what was necessary to survive? I know Frank had that in his early 20s.

I think there was a bit of me that hungered for a bit of normality. It did feel like it was an extraordinary situation I found myself in. After dad's I went to art school in Worthing and I lived in digs, these really weird rooms in other people's houses. Then I landed up squatting for quite a long time, until Tyrone was born and Ruth and I got a council flat, which was really beautiful. My first sort of home, that was my home, was in the suburbs of London in the very same house my dad moved to after the war in his late teens. I enjoyed decorating it. I hung shelves on the walls, and I had a vegetable garden. I had a kitchen in the conservatory, a bit like yours, and I grew marijuana, baked my own bread, and lived on toast and marmalade and brown rice and steamed onions.

How does your introduction to photography compare to Frank's or Tyrone's?

One thing that comes to mind is that I was born in the '60s, when photography was made super accessible to the general public through easy-to-load cameras that didn't require you to look at a focus or an f-stop. Instamatics and Polaroids—there was that side, and then there was processing black and white film, and at the same time as that, playing with Super 8.

What about in terms of the perspective or the resources that they had, compared to yours?

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It was all very available to me, I was the spoiled kid. I got everything, beyond everything, that I wanted.

But the aesthetic was available to Tyrone and Frank through you. You had to find the aesthetic.

I had to find an aesthetic, that's for sure. But I was very encouraged, actively encouraged. I didn't see it as a career, particularly, when I was young. But as life went on, it became a chosen course for me. I started thinking about the possibilities of it around 16 and became a bit more focused at 17. I started assisting when I was probably around 19.

What year did you buy Crunch?

When I was 26, so 57 and 26 is 70, 83, 84. In 1984.

And what was the area like then?

Kensal Rise was a sort of enclave which wasn't too heavy, but had some sort of street action around it, and it was just away from the trendy Notting Hill scene.

You've told me before that the property was kind of expensive.

Oh, yeah, it was expensive at the time for a garage, but I got planning on it, and I slowly started developing it.

Owning is a feeling that people so fantasise about. How was that feeling for you, really owning something?

It was when my career was all kicking off, and my mum had died. There was so much going on in my life that it was just another aspect, and though I sort of cared for it, I didn't care for it that much. I didn't really take it very seriously until Frank was born and I had to move in there with him.

Did you always imagine yourself living there eventually?

The planning that I'd got was

for it to be mixed use, so there was the thought. But how it might happen was beyond me. I didn't really think I was going to live past 35, so it wasn't anything that I worried about too much until I got there.

What did you think about Frank deciding to shoot the place's details instead of taking some straightforward interior shots?

Well, first I thought, 'What a wanker'. But his creativity always confuses and challenges me. My initial response to what he does is always to feel challenged. I went on to think of one of the sayings that I really like, 'The devil's in the detail, and so is salvation'. Or one of my own, 'Small world, massive universe, infinite detail'. Frank's reasons for doing it the way he did, I have a lot of admiration for it. You can tell as much from the microcosm as you can from the macrocosm. That thing of looking in through the details of a place is very interesting and alternative and, again, it challenges a way of looking at something.

It's really intimate, too.

Mark: Yes. That's right. It has an intimacy that a wider shot just definitely doesn't have. I mean, it's less awe-inspiring in a way, and much more intimate. That intimacy is actually quite frightening as well. The great thing about Frank is he's prepared to upset you.

Frank: Of course, now I keep thinking of all the other countless bits I should have got, like your dad's stools and things like that.

I think that the stool wasn't there, the day we were shooting.

Mark: It was, it just wasn't in its usual place.

Frank: That's the problem with doing this particular style; you're always going to miss stuff.

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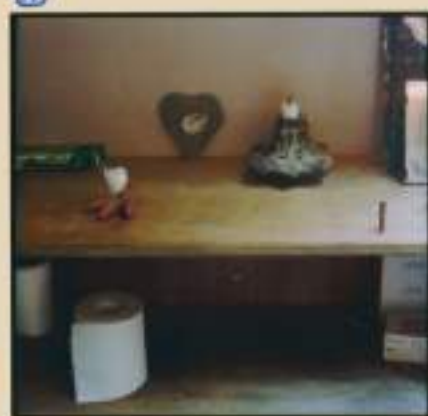
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Did you ever worry about having Frank as such a little kid running around what was essentially a building site?

Because I had had Tyrone at such a young age of 25, the thought of having Frank and looking after him was something that seemed very possible to do. Especially as my career had come and gone a few times, and I needed to step back from it. The role of fatherhood/motherhood was just an incredible gift. It was a wonderful focus at a time in my life when I was very spread out. What's the word?

Ungrounded?

Yeah. That's one expression, ungrounded. But there's a better expression than that. Discombobulated.

Was it ever dangerous to have Frank at Crunch, or Temple of Truth, whatever it was being called at the time?

Mark: No, no. I didn't worry about having him on the building site. We'd done quite a lot of camping together.

Frank: Uh, there were a few times—

Mark: You know, the roof blew off, we had our moments. Quite long periods without any heating or hot water. Not being able to afford to fix the boiler.

Frank: Showering with the hose.

Mark: Yeah. Using the hose to shower down in the summer, in the front yard. But, you know, it was all an adventure. We were all very happy to be alive and to be in the game. And also, the whole thing of being a single parent with Frank involved me letting go of my hedonistic lifestyle, and it was actually such an incredibly liberating experience. Having him was something perfect in my life. It wasn't a problem; it was a massive gift. It was never a problem.

And nor was the house, it seems like.

Mark: Some of the problems had to be solved; the roof blew off. I had a neighbour who helped me get a sheet onto the roof and cover the hole while I was holding little Frank in the pissing rain.

Frank: And that ended up being the leak that lasted 20 years.

Did you ever fantasise about what the place would look like when it was finished?

I had some architects in at the beginning, some young people who had just finished their architecture course. They had some very creative solutions, but I landed up just getting planning for a space and—well, after having to let go of these young architects, and the extraordinary visions of what it was going to be like, I had to actually go with what I could afford. Which was to pay as little as possible to get residential mixed use. I then got that planning permission, and I never thought I'd have the money to actually carry it out.

Then when you did have bits of money, what were the priorities?

To get the space and the light, and to do it within the budget that the bank gave me. Apart from it being watertight, the other big luxury that it had was that I moved the boiler out of my spiritual corner and into the bathroom, and I added underfloor heating.

What's your spiritual corner (photo 47)? Your house has a few important corners.

Yeah. My spiritual corner is where the boiler used to be; it used to keep breaking down and my tools were there. I had no luck in my relationships with my girlfriends, and the boiler very rarely worked for a very long time. So when I did the rebuild, it was very important to establish a spiritual corner that didn't have a boiler in it.



How did you know that that was your spiritual corner?

It's just that I was interested in feng shui at the time. Someone feng shuied it and told me what each area signified. And suddenly I realised why all my relationships were going wrong. Is it that fucking dodgy boiler in my spiritual corner? So I swore when I rebuilt it, I was going to get the boiler out. Just having gas and fire and water and tools all mixed in there, there wasn't any room for any spirituality. I got the boiler into the bathroom, and it hasn't caused me any problems since, and my spirituality and relationships have definitely improved since I've paid respect to that corner. I put a round edge in the corner too, just to give it that *je ne sais quoi*.

What are the other important corners?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. There's my creative corner, which is around the back of the stairs, where the fanny font is (photo 38), and the story behind the fanny font is that it used to be a corner of my studio where the rain got in. I quite liked that, and Frank had some terrapins. I got fed up with the smell that the heated tank used to give, and it used to break whenever we cleaned it. It was also quite an expense to heat, and I discovered that terrapins are just as happy in cold water.

So where the rain came in, in the corner of the room, I put a little sink and built a garden around it, and it became our water feature. Suddenly my creativity started to evolve, and I celebrated that when it was rebuilt by reinstating transparent internal rainwater pipes and putting a fanny font underneath the pipe, and my clothes-washing machine underneath that. So it's got a little bit of a fashion twist in there. It's got a bit of, like, keeping things

clean in there, and a little bit of creativity. It's still not fully settled in, the fanny font. When I get the right plants in there, then we're going to see some real blossoming of the whole creative side of my life. I can't remember what the other corners are, so those are probably the two most important ones. I also put those same Perspex rainwater drainpipes in the kitchen, bathroom, and back-of-house flat.

You have a lot of different stonework around the house, too, a lot of terrazzo. What is this blue spot that Frank took a photo of (photo 2)?

Mark: Crunch initially had a sort of concrete floor with flint aggregate in it that I wanted to sand down but never managed to do. When I eventually rebuilt and got the underfloor heating put in, I chose the grey and pink granite aggregate. Sadly the builders made a fudge-up of making it all level, so if I cleaned it, the water would collect in these dips we called valleys. That blueness was a way of filling in the valleys with blue skies—
Frank: Lakes.

Mark: No. With blue skies. And the idea was, it was going to look like thundery grey with cracks of blue sky coming through it, and that's what the little white edges are; those are the edges of the clouds, with the sun behind them. This is still something that might happen one day. But on that particular building session, which was quite a recent one, I decided to run a few tests, and that's what the blue resin is.

What are these little greeny bits by the drain (photo 8)?

Those little greeny bits are little marbly things that I bought down in Dorset. It's just a little bit of experimentation that went wrong. That didn't come out quite the way I wanted it to, but for the most part it's sort of alright.



There are a lot of drains all over the place.

Yeah. Well, I like the idea of being able to wash the floor easily and for it to be able to drain. We do have wet floors around the place quite a lot.

And what's the story behind the boat sitting in the back corner in the bathroom (photo 3)?

Oh yeah! Frank, we used to go sailing in Kensington Gardens; it was one of our outings that we'd go on every now and again in the summer, weather permitting. And we'd have races with our little sailing boats in the round pond right where, when I was a kid, I used to fly kites. But we moved on to little boats. But we did fly the odd kite as well.

Is this collection of shells and rocks something you did together, too (photo 6)?

Mark: I tell you, they represent memory in a perfect way because I can't remember where any of them came from, and each time I ever picked up a shell or a rock it was as a way of remembering that particular moment.

Frank: As a way of letting go of that memory.

Mark: Well, I wasn't intending for it to be a way of letting go. I intended for it to be a way of holding on to the memory. But then once you get so many of them all together, and you haven't labelled them—I'm terrible at labelling things—it just becomes a bunch of memories that don't really exist. My only memories that I have now are photographs, which is just the most ridiculous flaw. I always land up photographing completely unimportant moments. When anything really dramatic happens, the last thing I think of doing is picking up a camera and taking a picture. Or if something really beautiful happens, it's just like, I'm in the beauty, the last thing I'd ever do is actually take a picture of it.

Right.

So, you know, it's a metaphor for my memory, and lack of it.

And then what is the story behind your deep metal bathtub (photo 9)?

I found it on a street in Paris, when I used to drive my Chevy Impala '64 over to Paris to do the shows. It just had such a big boot; I could put this bath in the back of my boot and get it home with me. It's been a great companion to me, ever since I got it back there. I've blocked the overflow, so I can get it really, completely full up, and I hang my legs over the edge of it and it actually becomes a very deep and comfortable bath that takes up very little space.

But your shower is still a hose (photo 10).

Yeah, I like hoses. That was left over from when we didn't have hot water and we used to hose down outside. I've got very fond memories of that. So having hoses as a means of filling baths or stuff has become a feature of the house.

And your tag (photo 7, 52), what's the story behind those shapes?

That's an evolved version of my tag that I just recently did with some leftover concrete. Waste not, want not. There's the combination of a tear and a heart, it's like, pennies from heaven. A grey day seems really sad, but we need that water to grow from and, you know, the pain in love—I think they're essential to each other. It expresses that. Then I noticed it was an M as well, which is good for my name, so it became multipurpose. Also, where the lines cross, when you go around twice, it's where things cross over, where there are chance meetings, things moving apart and coming together again. That's what the double line is about.

Your Tibetan prayer flags are one of the things I noticed when I



first came over, too. Why did you separate the colours of your flags (photo 11, 13)?

Normally the red, yellow, green, blue, and white all go together, and they all look very, very clashy. But I've got my blue and white for internal space, so there's a bit of sky. And my external space is a sort of Rasta celebration, because I like the Caribbean culture, and Notting Hill Gate has that vibe to it. I like it mixing in with the Buddhist vibe, as well. But of course, I need to personalise pretty much everything in my life. I don't do it intentionally—or I don't always do it intentionally.

A lot of time has also been spent by this wood burner (photo 12). Where did this come from, and why do you think Frank took a photo of it? I like it right near the bath, where the water is. But also, when the heating breaks down, it's just like, 'Oh, no worry, I'll just chuck a log on the fire. We'll be fine'. And you can dry clothes on the hanging rail above it.

I feel like everything has a purpose, especially in this area of the house. What is this chalkboard supposed to be used for (photo 15)? It was going to be a place to put lists of things that I needed to do, or stuff like that, but it landed up, no surprises, being sort of like a cathartic/emotional expression. The names are of people who have died, and the cigarettes, they're reminding me to give up smoking, which I hope I have actually managed to achieve now. The bathroom door used to be a blackboard, and that used to have a record of me going on runs.

This piece is always nice to see, sensibly hung near the bed. I think Frank was inspired by this when he hung a piece by our bed that says 'ASLEEP' (photo 16).

Yeah, that's by Olly and Suzi; that's one of the first things they actually sold. They're great nature painters. But it was to do with awakenings. They'd seen the film *Awakenings*. It was one of my mum's favourite books, and it was a response to that film, that's why they made that. I just really loved it, and I really love them, and I love their art; it's all about being in nature and interacting with nature. They did very few human-orientated things. This was a very early piece of theirs, and it did involve something very human. So I feel it's a very special piece.

The wood carvings are an important feature of the house, too. How was your relationship with Dave Baby integral to your life, or more specifically to Crunch (photo 26, 35, 36, 37)?

Frank: It seems to me that you represented Judy and Chris quite outwardly in the fashion world, and your chance to represent Dave Baby always seemed like it was in the house.

Mark: When I first met Judy, he was probably one of the most frightening-looking skinheads I'd ever seen. I thought he was going to beat the shit out of me. He landed up being this gay, queeny designer, and Dave, at the same time—covered in tattoos, a hairy monster of a biker guy—landed up being the soft, squidgy, Dave baby. A lot of what Dave plays with, be it fallacies or black magic-y sorts of things, or Hells Angels-y sorts of things, or swastikas that he sees as being peace signs, or vaginas that become crucifixions, it's sort of like bringing the dark into the light. That became one of those contrasty things that create a balance. If ever I do come to a place of wanting to define beauty, it is this balance, which includes opposites. On the front door there are symbols for day and night, and



masculinity and femininity, and contrasting elements.

Love, lust?

Well, again, it's the contrast of this pompous—the good temple for truth. It seems sort of pompous and self-righteous. But I needed to balance it out with love, lust, life, and lies. That creates a balance, and, to me, that's what I like. I like a dynamic balance. Now I suppose, just the whole place is mixed with space and clutter, clean and dirty, dusty and clean. Bright and dark.

I guess we should also talk about Hank.

Frank: The latest member to live at Crunch.

You bought a dog soon after you had an empty nest. And then you gave him a name that rhymes with your youngest son.

But I've always loved the name Hank! Yes, Hank always looks miserable. He's far too pretty. I never really thought of myself as good-looking, but Hank is definitely a looker. I was a bit concerned about that thing of owners being like their dogs; it didn't seem to work. But then I realised that Hank also looks miserable all the time and hardly ever wags his tail, unless it's to welcome you back. And that about sums me up as well. It's only once I've really missed someone that I am really fucking overjoyed and happy.

Do you confuse their names a lot?
Yeah.

Did you make this Lebon trucker hat (photo 40)?

Ah, the Lebon hat. The Lebon hat is something that my brother designed. He was very ego-driven, and it's up there in remembrance of my brother and just how lovely he was. He had the hair salon CUTS, which we just made a book about. Then he became a director, and then he was quite good



in the digital world when it first arrived. He also got into being a bit of a family man before he died, and that was really good. I was very happy that he had that experience.

The Frank graffiti (photo 57) was after Fritz's time. When did that get there?

Mark: Fritz did the Tyrone. And then Frank did his own.

Frank: My first graf.

Then the drawing of Frank and Tyrone on your dinner table is another beautiful tribute to your boys.

Mark: Well, my boys are so important to me. I like to have them around. Sophie Glover did a drawing of Frank when we were having a Carnival party at Crunch. I put Sellotape over it.

Frank: Everyone used to just draw on that white table, and then Dad would come back from wherever he was and tape it up, because you liked it like that.

OK. Another question: why do you like yellow flowers so much?

It was my favourite colour from about 10 or 15 years ago, when I used to buy lots of daffodils in the spring, for as long as the season lasted. Then even when they dried out and died, I used to keep all the dried-out daffodil heads around, because I loved the colour yellow. That's what it represented, and then it went on to become a favourite colour and then conveniently sorted





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out what I was going to do with my Instagram account, because basically I thought, 'Keep it simple, photograph the table'. And the things that were most often on the table were these yellow flowers. So that's what defined it all for me.

Your kitchen is always a meeting place at your house, for breakfast or for tea. Food is really—

Too important. Food is too important in my life. I need to come up with a food plan which involves eating less, where I'm not eating all my feelings. But I've got quite a nice kitchen now. I've got all the counter surfaces at Lebon height.

I can't reach anything; that's why I don't do the dishes.

Yeah, makes it a bit awkward for our short girlfriends. But there's always a kick stool around.

What are some meals you've made recently?

My latest thing is something my girlfriend taught me to do, which

is to sort of steam vegetables in a mixture of olive oil, water, and garlic in a frying pan. I quite like my vegetables, my greens, overcooked. What else am I into? Oh, recently there's this whole thing for toasting bread in a frying pan with some butter in it. You know, like you fry to toast it with melted cheese.

You, Frank, and Tyrone all share the same problem of hunger being like your kryptonite. Generally you're patient and sweet, and then the second you're hungry, you're evil. I know, I'm a very hangry man. If I'm hungry, I'm angry. Talking of which, I think we need to get some tarte tatin with some cream on it and another coffee and some more water.

Yeah?

Mark: Frank?

Frank: Oh yeah (photo 50).

