

# I DID ABOMINABLE THINGS

**FILM** TONY KAYE ONCE CALLED HIMSELF 'THE GREATEST ENGLISH DIRECTOR SINCE HITCHCOCK'. BEFORE LONG HE WAS LOCKED IN THE MOST LUDICROUS LEGAL BATTLE HOLLYWOOD HAS EVER SEEN, HIS TANTRUMS AND EXCESSES HAVING PROVEN TOO MUCH FOR EVERYONE AROUND HIM – EVEN MARLON BRANDO. IS HE SORRY? DEEPLY, HE TELLS ADAM HIGGINBOTHAM

PORTRAIT BY MICHAEL EVANET

**B**y 1998, barely two years after he started work on *American History X*, his first feature as a director, Tony Kaye had few friends left in Hollywood. He had fallen out with his star, alienated his producers and begun a legal battle with the Directors Guild of America that would become protracted and absurd; it seemed that wherever he turned, he faced furious executives.

Finally, he became so exhausted by angry phone calls that he resolved to stop speaking on the telephone altogether. His assistant spoke for him and relayed conversations.

'The big thing was not to have people shouting at me,' he says. 'I wanted to hear the content of what they had to say, but I didn't want to hear how they felt.' If he found himself alone on the street and needed to make an urgent call, he would dial the number on a payphone and ask a total stranger to speak on his behalf.

Such tactics became less and less necessary. Eventually, nobody in Hollywood would return phone calls made by Tony Kaye, no matter who was speaking for him. He spent nearly a decade in the wilderness of the movie industry. The world of television advertising – the industry in which he made his name and which continues to accord his past work legendary status – turned its back on him, too.

'I was untouchable in all my film-making endeavours – television commercials, music videos, films, anything,' he says, 'I was a pirate. You know: "Don't go near that bloke".' Even today, he doesn't think there's a single commercials production company in London that would represent him. When I ask how this happened, how someone who in 2002 was the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award for his advertising work could now be unemployable, Kaye tries a few explanations: 'People have short memories...' he begins; and then, 'I created...'; but both times he trails off.

'Listen,' he says finally, 'I did a lot of very insane things. A lot of very, very, very insane things.'

AT 54, TONY KAYE IS TALL, ANGULAR AND TWITCHY, HIS shaved head emphasising the gaunt planes of his face. On his left wrist he wears an expensive-looking watch and the red string of the Kabbalah. His speech is nervous, halting and punctuated by silences and false starts – apparently as much a result of his determination to get what he's saying exactly right as of the stammer he's had since childhood. He leaves so many sentences unfinished that his conversation resembles an abstract jigsaw-puzzle.

When we first sit down to talk, he immediately expresses concern about how this story might turn out: 'This is a good thing, right?' he asks. 'It's not, like... make me look... because I'm terrible with these things, you know... So is it a nice...?'

We have come to the small Southern college town of Wilmington, North Carolina, because an arts club has invited Kaye to introduce a screening of *American History X* – 'which I'm not so comfortable about,' he says. Kaye's anxiety about the film goes back a long way. At the 1998 Academy Awards, the movie won a best-actor nomination for Edward Norton, who stars as the leader of a gang of Californian neo-Nazis, and has since gathered a strong cult following. 'It's No 16 on Best Dramas of All Time on the IMDb [Internet Movie Database],' he says. 'It's become quite a little classic in its own befuddled way.' But the battle over artistic control of the film, which has become part of Hollywood folklore, all but destroyed Kaye's career. He delivered his original cut on time and within budget – but when the producer, New Line Cinema, insisted on changes, the arguments began.

'I'm fully aware that I'm a first-time director, but I need the same autonomy and respect that Stanley Kubrick gets,' he said at the time.

The debate quickly escalated. Kaye spent \$100,000 of his own money to take out 35 full-page ads in the Hollywood trade press denouncing Norton and the producer, using quotations from a variety of people from John Lennon to Abraham Lincoln. He attended a meeting at New Line to which (to ease negotiations) he brought a Catholic priest, a

**HE TOOK AN INFLATABLE E.T. DOLL EVERYWHERE. AT MEETINGS, IT HAD ITS OWN CHAIR**





rabbi and a Tibetan monk. When the company offered him an additional eight weeks to re-cut the film, he said he'd discovered a new vision and needed a year to remake it, and flew to the Caribbean to have the script rewritten by the poet Derek Walcott. Finally, when the Directors Guild refused to let him remove his name from the New Line version, he demanded it be credited to 'Humpty Dumpty' instead and filed a \$200million lawsuit when it refused.

The changes Kaye objected to amounted to 18 minutes of footage added to his version; and yet he's remained so upset by their effect that the closest he's come to seeing the final cut of the film is when he was editing it, nearly 10 years ago. 'I was trying to make a much grander, epic film,' he says. 'Some people think it's a great film; I think it could have been better.'

And so, he admits, tonight's free screening – sponsored by the Wilmington YWCA, North Carolina, in a reclaimed industrial space before an audience of about 60 people – will be the first time that he has ever seen the film that bears his name. After the screening, he plans to perform some songs he's written ('It's just an experiment') and show half-an-hour of footage from a documentary he is making about the struggle over the film, composed chiefly of video he shot of himself at the time. 'It's a personal portrait of the process and the trauma that I encountered in my first experience as a Hollywood film-maker,' he says. He plans to call the finished film *Humpty Dumpty*.

Perhaps surprisingly, Kaye has found a theatrical distributor for *Humpty Dumpty*. More surprising, it is New Line Cinema. After a theatrical release, the company will include the film on next year's 10th anniversary DVD re-release of *American History X*. 'They're helping me with everything. That's amazing, isn't it?' he says. 'Them thinking it's great? And it will be when I've finished: a very interesting film, I think. Very interesting.'

The reconciliation with New Line is just one sign that Kaye's time in the wilderness may finally be over. At the end of last year, *Lake of Fire* – the documentary about abortion in America he has been working on since 1990 – received a rapturous reception at the Toronto Film Festival. The two-and-a-half hour film, shot in black and white, is a compelling exploration of both sides of the abortion debate, as merciless in its depiction of homicidal pro-life campaigners as it is of the abortion procedure itself.

'I was blown away by the film. I could not shake it,' says Mark Urman, the head of US distribution at ThinkFilm, which bought *Lake of Fire* and will release it later this year. 'Certain films make you think. A lot of documentaries are meant to make you think; this film makes you think again and again.'

When Kaye and I meet in Wilmington, he has just begun work on his first feature-film project since *American History X*: the New Orleans-set thriller, *Black Water Transit*. 'I'm sort of at the beginning now,' he says. 'At last I'm becoming a film-maker. I really feel now that I've begun the journey that I planned many years ago.'

Kaye has always wanted to be an artist. He grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Stamford Hill, north London, where his father worked in garment manufacturing – 'mass-market stuff... a very Jewish kind of occupation,' he says. By the age of 13, he had given up football and decided to become a painter; at 16 he left school and at 18 enrolled at Medway College of Design in Kent to study design and illustration. The college's commercial bias frustrated him and he tried to pursue his own fine arts course – few of his lecturers appreciated, for instance, his 'Brussels sprouts project', in which he attempted to 'scientifically study the dynamic of what a Brussels sprout was'.

After two years, aged 20, Kaye left Medway, returned home to live with his parents and took odd jobs in shops and pubs while trying to realise his artistic ambitions in his bedroom. Each week, Kaye took his efforts to the Sunday art market on the Bayswater Road. In two years, he sold just one piece of work – for £4. Fruitless applications for work in art galleries around the globe ended when he was given a job at a graphic-design studio. Kaye's fine-art ambitions dwindled and he took graphic design more seriously. He attended night classes at the ICA, moved to a small agency in the West End and began designing book jackets.

But Kaye remained crippled by his speech impediment – his stammer made him incapable of using the phone. To enable him to call friends, he prepared a tape of recorded phrases which he would play into the receiver, beginning with, 'Hello, this is Tony.' At work, things were more difficult: to commission illustrations, he walked to artists' homes to speak to them face

**BRANDO BEFRIENDED KAYE AT THE PEAK OF THE CHAOS: 'I HEAR YOU'RE AS CRAZY AS I AM'**

to face; if he needed to ask directions, he pretended to be Russian and scribbled pictograms on pieces of paper. 'I think that helped me with the visual communication,' he says.

In 1979, Kaye was offered his first job in advertising as a junior art director at Collett, Dickinson and Pearce. At the time it was the biggest agency in London and, buoyed with confidence at getting the job, he found his stammer receding. He began to use the phone properly for the first time: he was 27. The agency was also the place from which the British admen Alan Parker and Ridley Scott had recently graduated to film directing; this knowledge had another, profound, effect on Kaye. 'I went in there on the first day, determined to make films,' he says.

AT JENGO'S PLAYHOUSE, IN WILMINGTON, TONY KAYE TAKES a seat near the back as *American History X* begins. He stays just long enough to see the title sequence, then disappears into a back office for the duration. 'I just had to get out again,' he says afterwards, and makes a strangled noise. 'I had to duck out of it. I couldn't stand it. Just fled with demons in me. I couldn't sit through the whole thing. It was just too painful.'

Kaye doesn't find seeing himself on screen in *Humpty Dumpty* easy to take, either: 'It's pretty embarrassing,' he tells me. 'It's very difficult for me to watch. It's funny – it's a comedy, but it's very tragic.' He introduces the film to the audience of local cineastes and tattooed hipsters by announcing: 'This is a director going completely mad.' And there are many moments in the movie when this seems to be literally true: at one point Kaye films himself taking a call from the manager of the film's co-star, Edward Furlong, while simultaneously stamping a VHS copy of the film to pieces. In the next shot, Kaye drops the shattered fragments of tape and cassette into a lavatory and flushes it. 'You see,' his lone voice screams in the background. 'It won't even go down the toilet, it's such a piece of shit.'

The film closes with a sequence filmed in the living-room of Marlon Brando, who befriended Kaye at the peak of the chaos, inviting him to his house and greeting him with, 'I hear that you're as crazy as I am.' Kaye and Brando each hold a video camera and sit opposite one another, filming their conversation over a coffee table. Brando, carefully, reasonably, tells Kaye how foolish he's being: 'I pleaded with you not to make a spectacle of the events surrounding your taking your name off this picture and putting the name Humpty Dumpty in place of it,' he says. 'I reminded you that you had signed a piece of paper, as we all do in this life, requiring certain services under certain circumstances...'

But Kaye persists: he tells Brando that if the Directors Guild won't let him credit the movie to Humpty Dumpty because he must use his real name, then he has devised a simple solution: 'I will be changing my name... to that, for a while.'

'What did you say?'

'I'm saying I'm going to change my name.'

At this, Brando's paternal calm disintegrates. His enormous bulk shakes with laughter.

'You're going to officially change your name to Humpty Dumpty?' he chuckles. 'That's *damned* good!'

ALMOST FROM THE OUTSET OF HIS CAREER IN ADVERTISING, Tony Kaye's behaviour was steered by that of the men whose work he wanted to emulate: 'The directors I admired, like Francis Ford Coppola and Erich von Stroheim – they were all nuts, kind of mad. So I just thought to myself, you've got to be eccentric to do well in this business.' The more mad he seemed, the better. A keen student of The Beatles, Kaye decided there was an important lesson to be drawn from their career, too: 'I've got to get in the papers every week.'

After three years as a successful – if conventional – art director, Kaye was anxious to get on with his Hollywood career and he announced that he was leaving to direct television advertisements. It was six months before Kaye was hired to direct his first advertisement, for Olivetti computers, but it won a prize at the Cannes advertising festival in 1983. 'Aha!' he thought, 'I've f---ing done it now! And that,' he says, 'is when I went round the bend.'

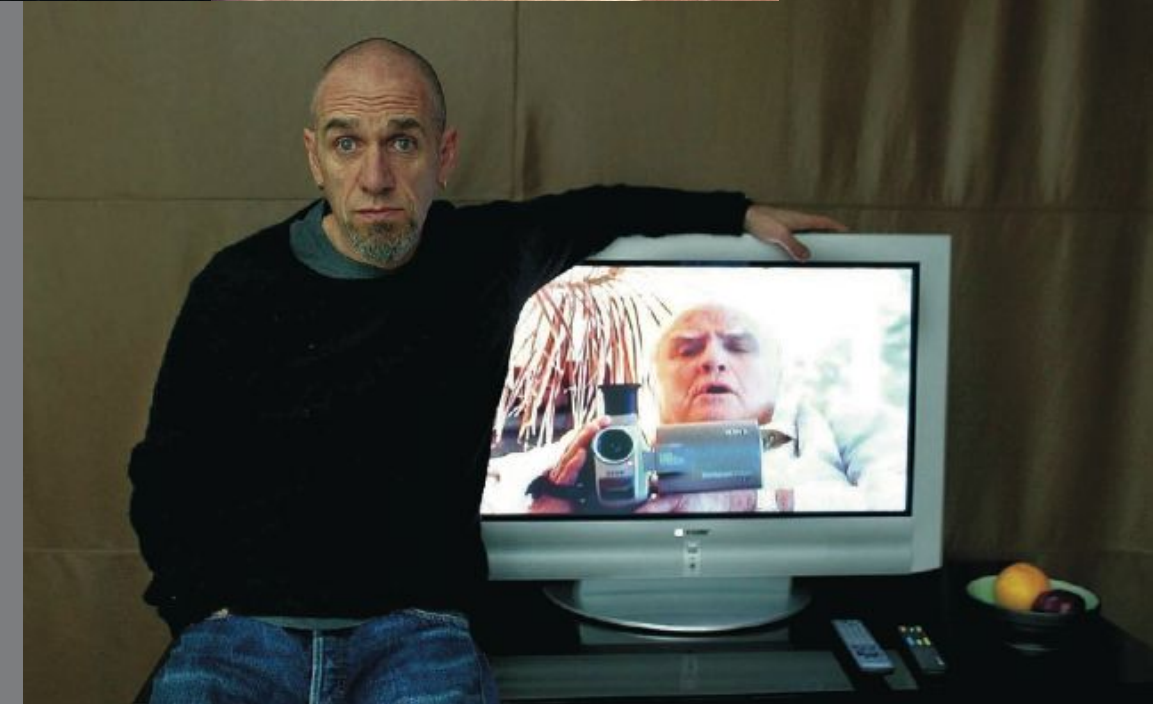
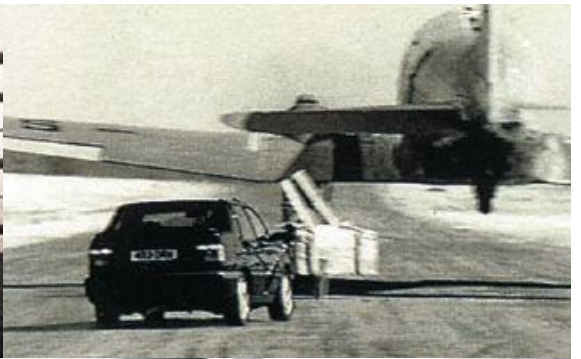
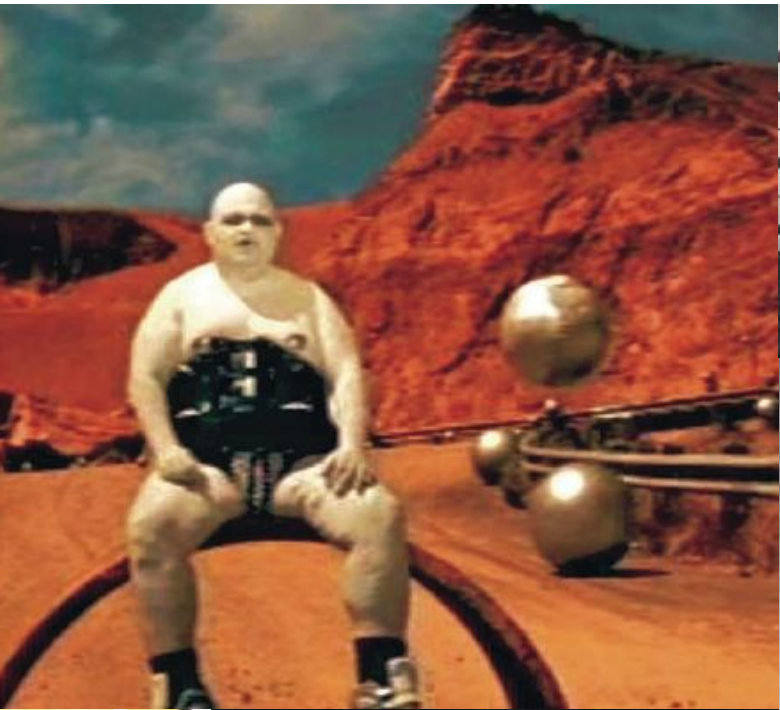
To solidify the kind of reputation he felt he needed, Kaye engaged in a series of stunts that infuriated the advertising community, including bursting into a meeting at Saatchi and Saatchi to distribute promotional leaflets about himself and, later, appearing in reception there, dressed in combat fatigues, and kidnapping a secretary ('A girl I was living with at the time...'). Afterwards, he was arrested.



**'This is a director going completely mad'**  
Tony Kaye (right) with his video of Marlon Brando, who pleaded with him not to change his name to Humpty Dumpty. From top left, Kaye-directed advertisements for Dunlop; Guinness; Volvo; British Rail; and real fires. Above right: Kate Moss in Kaye's video for Johnny Cash's 'God's Gonna Cut You Down'. Below, from left: Brando; 'Lake of Fire'; and Edward Furlong and Edward Norton in 'American History X'







**'I COULDN'T SIT THROUGH THE WHOLE THING. JUST FLED WITH DEMONS IN ME. IT WAS TOO PAINFUL!'**





Kaye started his own company and signed with a producing partner, announcing the deal with an ad in the industry magazine *Campaign*, which showed Kaye drinking a Heineken and then turning into Steven Spielberg. He bought an inflatable E.T. doll, which he took everywhere – at lunches with potential clients, E.T. was given his own chair and Kaye listened to music on headphones while his partner did all the talking. He ran a full-page ad in the *Evening Standard* that proclaimed: ‘Tony Kaye Is The Greatest English Director Since Hitchcock.’ It was hardly a winning strategy. By 1986 he had directed only a handful of commercials, his company had gone into liquidation, he was heavily in debt and his London flat had been repossessed; he took to living out of a carrier bag and sleeping on sofas. On the dole, he gave up meat, alcohol, tea and coffee (‘I decided to become a passive Travis Bickle – a machine.’) and spent most of his days at the National Film Theatre, watching one movie after another.

His big break didn’t come until 1987, when he made two ads. The first, for British Rail, used clever animations to depict train travel as so relaxing that chess pieces yawn and the penguin on the spine of a paperback slides into a snooze. He shot for weeks and weeks, spending the entire £250,000 budget on making the 90-second spot: despite being penniless, he took nothing in payment. ‘Not a dime,’ he says. In the Real Fires commercial that followed, he persuaded a dog, a cat and a mouse to kiss on a hearth-rug. Both won a clutch of awards, and became among the most celebrated television commercials of the decade.

In the years that followed, Kaye became famous for his temper tantrums, his stunts and excesses: shooting more usable film for a 30-second Volvo ad than Woody Allen shot for all of *Hannah and Her Sisters*; having a bridge built from scratch across the Corinth Canal, in southern Greece, for one car commercial, and insisting on having 900 babies Velcro-ed to the floor for another; lobbying the Tate to exhibit his ad for Dunlop tyres; and each season buying one piece of every item in the *Comme des Garçons* menswear collection.

Yet his work, shot in black and white, luminous colour or soft sepia, helped define the visual style of the era and earned him an unprecedented total of 23 design and art direction awards – the Oscars of the ad industry.

Kaye married a model he met on a shoot for Pepe Jeans, and in 1991 he moved to Hollywood. But he continued to court controversy. In 1995, after being fired from directing an ad for British Airways, he accused its marketing manager of racism and sued for more than half a million in unpaid fees. When BA settled out of court, Kaye exhibited his invoice for £714,421.12 in Charles Saatchi’s gallery. It was, he said, ‘Hype Art’: like the time he tried to hijack the opening of a Damien Hirst exhibition of medical equipment at the White Cube gallery by hiring ambulances to drive around the block with sirens blaring, in a work he titled *Empty Vessels Make the Most Noise*; or the stunt where he paid a homeless man to accompany him to art galleries around the world, and attempted to exhibit him as ‘Roger, by Tony Kaye’. ‘I was part of the BritArt, Damien Hirst thing,’ he says now. ‘I got left behind.’

None the less, by 1996, Kaye was reportedly the highest-paid director in UK advertising, commanding £10,000 a day. That same year – after rejecting other projects including *9½ Weeks II* – he was offered *American History X*. He took the contract to a synagogue to have it blessed: ‘I signed it in front of the rabbi. I thought it would make it good.’

Although the three-year fracas over the film made Kaye unemployable in Hollywood, he remained in demand for prestigious commercials work, for a while. ‘Because I had this notion that I had to be – I had to appear – as insane as I possibly could. This time to frighten people away who were gonna waste my time.’

With this in mind, Kaye’s behaviour became more extraordinary than ever. He argued with the agency McCann Erickson over the last few seconds of a Bacardi commercial. When they hired another director to reshoot the ending, Kaye sent his staff to the Dominican Republic to hide the people he’d photographed on the other side of the island. When the new director returned empty-handed, Kaye flew the Dominicans to the UK and paraded them outside McCann’s London headquarters on a flatbed truck, accompanied by a 10-piece reggae band. ‘I mean, mental. Mental... I’m very embarrassed. I did *abominable* things.’

By 2000, Kaye couldn’t get any work of any description, and his production company in London went bust. ‘I went bankrupt because I



#### Stunt man

Kaye paid Roger Powell, a homeless man, to accompany him to art galleries (including the Tate, above), exhibiting him as ‘Roger, by Tony Kaye’



GRAHAM JEFFSON/FNP

**'I WAS PART OF THE BRITART THING. I GOT LEFT BEHIND'**

became so difficult and uncontrollable that nobody would work with me,' he says. He began work on a film without a script he called *Lobby Lobster* – which he tended to describe differently every time he talked about it – and he continued putting together the abortion documentary he had been filming on and off since arriving in the US. But nothing ever seemed to get finished. At one point, Kaye's agent began sending him to castings as an actor.

Marlon Brando tried to help bail his friend out, inviting him to direct a series of DVDs entitled *Lying for a Living*, in which Brando – and a workshop class that included Sean Penn, Jon Voight, Michael Jackson and Leonardo DiCaprio – taught people how to use acting in everyday life. 'How to ask your boss for a raise. If you get home late, how to deal with your other half. How to act, how to get through life easier. And Marlon's teaching it. That's a massive best-seller, right?' But Kaye couldn't help himself: on the first day of shooting, in November 2001, he turned up dressed as Osama bin Laden; on the next, he argued vehemently with two of the student actors, took his camera, and walked out. Brando never spoke to him again. 'I phoned him several times and he never took my call. I was really stupid. I was so stupid to do that. So, so stupid... very bad.'

It took years for Kaye to begin to undo the damage he had done to his career; he was eventually offered two feature-film projects to develop, but was fired from each. On one, *Reaper*, he got as far as a meeting attended by the prospective star, Liv Tyler, but in the middle of it lost his temper, banged the table and accidentally knocked over his glass of orange juice. 'It went near the writer's computer, so it seemed like I was throwing it. And that was the end of that one.'

So he went back to where he'd started, taking whatever commercials work he could get. He avoided getting involved in the creative side and did what he was told. Last year, Kaye made a video for the Red Hot Chili Peppers' hit single *Dani California*, which won seven MTV awards. More recently, he directed a clip for Johnny Cash's *God's Gonna Cut You Down*, with a cast that included Kate Moss, Justin Timberlake and Bono. When I ask him if people now expect him to be mad, he thinks for a long time. 'I don't know, to be honest,' he says finally. 'I mean, I know I'm not.'

THESE DAYS, TONY KAYE LIVES IN A SPRAWLING 1960S HOUSE in the hills of Bel Air, with his second wife, Yan-Lin, an artist from San Francisco, and their baby daughter, Shanghai. The internal walls have been torn out, so that the house resembles a serpentine studio, curled around an ornamental pool. Outside, giant abstract canvases lean against the wall, daubed with phrases that have overflowed onto nearby objects; two television sets sit beside a wall, their screens obscured by coats of yellow ochre.

Inside one canvas lies flat on the concrete floor, covered with everyday objects – mobile phones, spectacles, a plastic alligator – glued down and painted over. As Kaye sits eating his breakfast – a large tumbler of raw oats topped with chocolate soya milk – he points out a small, gold canvas beside his desk: 'That goes back 20 years. But it's not anything yet. All this stuff is, like, five years away from...' He trails off, chewing his oats. 'Some of the stuff outside is getting to look quite interesting – the more it gets knocked about by the weather, you know.' Kaye went back to painting in 1987. 'I don't exhibit, and I don't sell anything. I'm not very good, I don't think.'

He's been involved with the Kabbalah centre in LA for a few years, and credits the cult with helping him calm down. 'It was the missing pieces of my puzzle,' he says. 'I mean, listen, I'm a human being. I still lose my temper, but nothing like I used to. I'm aware of it immediately – that the devil is taking over the more rational side.' He says he's making a documentary about the Bergs, the family that founded the Kabbalah centre, titled *I Hope We Never Have To Say Goodbye*; it isn't finished yet.

In reflective moments, Tony Kaye will tell you that he thinks the *American History X* debacle was good for him: 'In the long term,' he says, 'it was one of the best pieces of education I ever had.'

I ask Kaye how he would describe himself. 'At this point?' he asks, glancing at the stacks of canvases. There is a long pause. 'I would describe myself at this point... as a desperate man.' He laughs.

What makes you say that?

'Because there's only so much time in a day and so many days in a year and so many years in a lifetime. And I've got so many things I have to finish that it's a scramble. The older I get, the more I see how to complete things – and I have so much work to do. So that's why I'm a desperate man.' **S**