

The Arts

Painter Sebastian Horsley has taken his work to a new extreme

by Nick Hackworth

ON his 38th birthday Sebastian Horsley, a painter and professional dandy, realised a long-cherished ambition to be crucified. He had to go to the Philippines to have it done. There, since the Sixties, a number of devout Christians have had themselves crucified every Easter, as they seek to gain a measure of Christ's purity by sharing in the physical pain he suffered.

Eighteen months later, immaculately groomed and flamboyantly suited, Horsley is sitting in his flat in deepest Soho, showing me the nails that were used. They look unfeasibly large and cruel, like masonry nails, but when I make him show me his hands, I see no scars. Disappointed, I take one of his hands in mine, turn it over, examine the palm and this time find a mark, but it is so faint as to be almost indistinguishable from the lines and creases around it. If there were not a film recording of the ordeal I might not have believed that it happened.

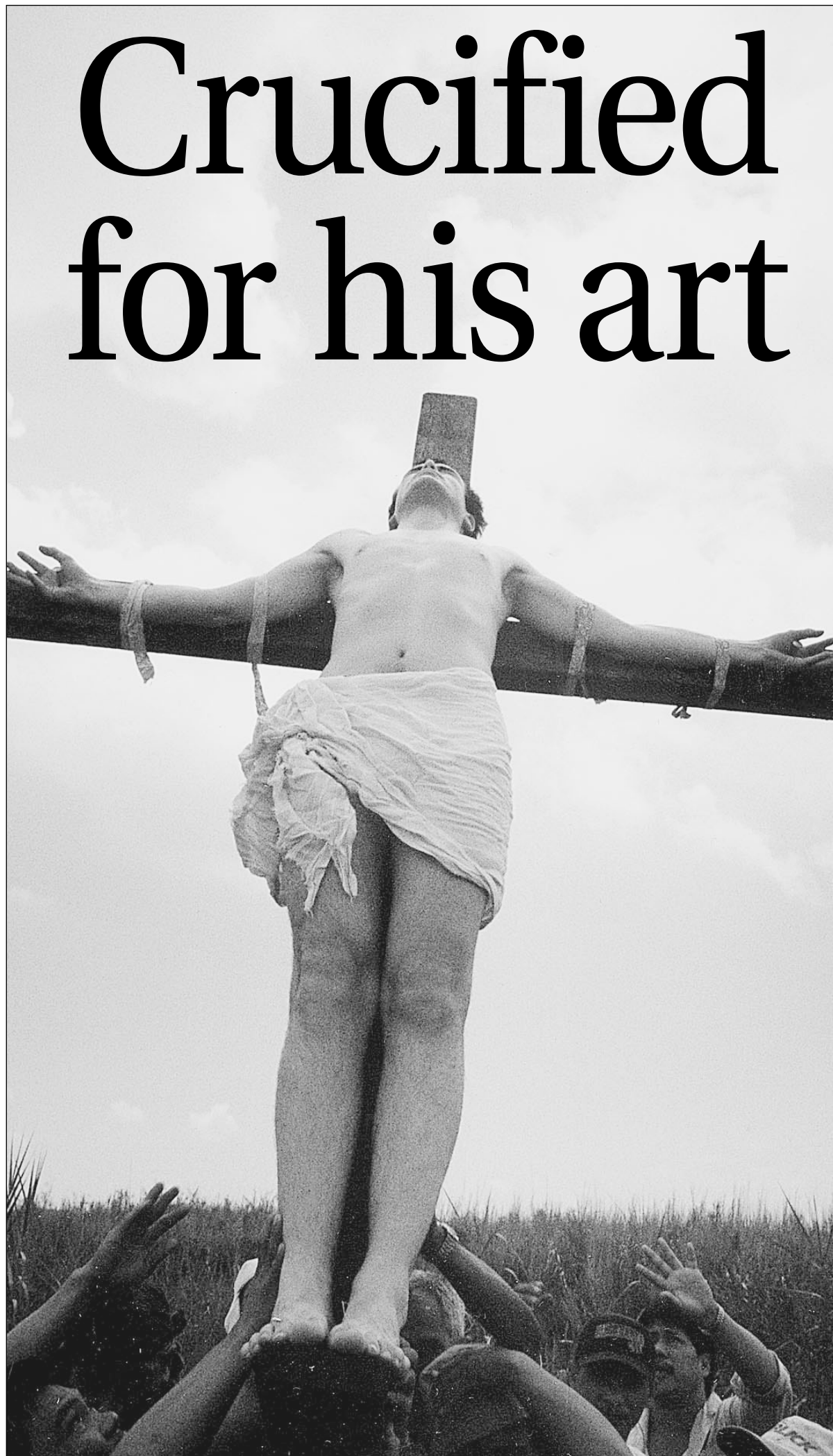
I ask, rather obviously, about how much it hurt. "It was indescribable," he says "when the nails went in, so much worse than I imagined. I've never experienced anything so excruciating before. This is it, is all I can remember thinking. This is the end." In fact, he was unconscious for a time — how long, he has no way of knowing.

"Actually there were two types of pain, the physical pain but also the mental horror of anticipation which I experienced beforehand, knowing that I was volunteering for this torture. Most pain comes suddenly and unexpectedly, but I knew what was coming, and that was agony."

Being an atheist gripped with "the zest of non-belief" Horsley did not have himself crucified in order to get closer to Christ. As it is he feels quite close to Christ anyway; both he and the Messiah are, in his estimation, "male figures of profound style". Instead, he did it for his art's sake, believing, as he does, that "an artist has to go to every extreme to stretch his sensibility through excess and suffering, in order to feel and communicate more".

Thus Horsley apes the great romantic tradition forged by wayward heroes such as the poet Rimbaud. Like them, he champions the subjective experience of the artist and plots a path to a truth of sorts by pushing beyond the boundaries of normal behaviour. Fortunately for one drawn to the romantic path, Horsley displays an impressive and instinctive flair for excess and abnormality. As well as painting, he writes a column for the magazine *Erotic Review*, entitled *Sewer Life*, which is, as he tells me, about "sex, drugs ... er, that's it". It recounts, with amusing regularity, Horsley's regular transgressions of the social norms and laws of our land.

Stacked up against the walls of his flat are 20 or so large paintings that are the fruit of his last, particularly extreme transgression in the Philippines. By nature Horsley is a painterly painter; most at home with the fluidity of oils. He builds up depth and colour in his canvases through successive layers and describes tortured, Baconesque figures with expressive brushstrokes. In some of the pieces he has depicted only the contorted human form crucified, set in dark and deep



backgrounds. In others, however, Horsley has applied thick, monochromatic layers of acrylic paint over the rich, layered surface leaving only monolithic crucifix forms in which the original painting is still visible.

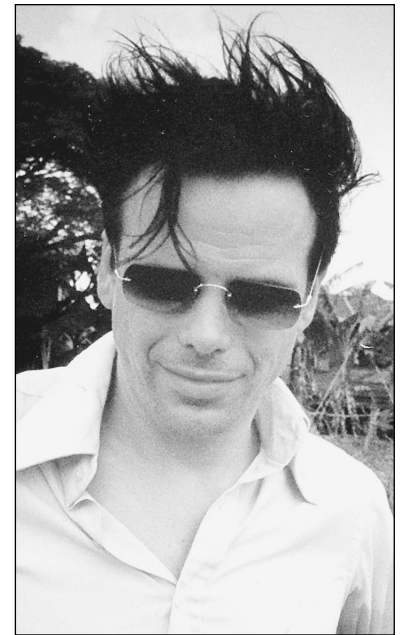
Horsley's favourite painting from the series happens to be the happiest marriage of the two styles, with a white outline of a cross superimposed on a figurative crucifixion scene. He explains that he wanted to take this most loaded of subjects and

symbols and see if he could interpret it afresh. He was not, however, interested in painting objects but in painting what he felt and sensed — hence the self-imposed ordeal.

As the act of being crucified and the paintings form two parts of a whole, it would be fair to say that Horsley is as much a performance artist as a painter. Indeed, some would place his work within the tradition of abject performance art, art that seeks to explore the social and moral limits of behaviour

through extreme acts perpetrated with the body. Appropriately, when the paintings go on show next month at a new gallery (located somewhat absurdly in a street called Crucifix Lane), they will be accompanied by Horsley's film of the crucifixion, shot by Sarah Lucas. There will also be a display of documentary photographs taken by Dennis Morris, best known for his work with The Sex Pistols and Bob Marley.

Of the three elements that com-



Sebastian Horsley, above, passed out after he was nailed to a cross in the Philippines (left). The experience inspired a series of paintings, including *Crucifixion No 6*, below



prise the show, photography, painting and film, the film is the most immediately affecting. It captures the surprisingly subdued atmosphere of the event: the calmness with which the local Filipinos treat this pale westerner as they strip him down and place him on the cross; and the gentleness with which the nails are tapped in, through the flesh and into the wood. Astonishingly, Horsley does not cry out when the nails go in; it is the lack of drama that proves truly moving.

Once you see him up on the cross — for about half-an-hour, if the film edit gives an accurate impression — it would be hard not to feel pity for the crucified man, with his torso splayed out and his being subdued by pain.

On watching the film, it is apparent that, for all the flamboyance of his persona, Horsley is deadly serious in pursuing his artistic ambitions. While his extreme act has an obvious drama to it, he dismisses the notion that theatricality somehow negates seriousness. That, he says, is a peculiarly English belief. And there is something exhilarating about the fact that he doesn't much care for what the English — or anyone else, for that matter — thinks anyway.

● *The exhibition Crucifixion is at the Crucifix Lane Project, 1 Crucifix Lane, London, SE1, from 14 June to 18 July (020 8980 1033 www.crucifixlaneproject.com). Nailing an Illusion: Will Self and Sebastian Horsley in conversation at the ICA, 6 June (020 7766 1406).*