

Body and Soul

The work of Marc Quinn

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In the nineties, the artist Marc Quinn (London, 1964) shocked the British art world with what is still his best-known work: *Self* (1991). This is a statue of his own head comprising five litres of his own frozen blood. It is typical of Quinn's work, which is conspicuous due to a distinct form language with great visual impact.

Quinn studied history and art history at Cambridge and this perhaps explains the occasional art-historical and scientific nature of his work. Quinn survived the turbulence of the nineties and worked on an oeuvre that did not go unnoticed. Nowadays, his work is displayed both at home and abroad and it has been purchased by major collectors, including international museums. Quinn has also been approached by prestigious customers such as the National Portrait Gallery in London, for example. He has also managed to reach a wide public with the installation of his work *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, a statue of a seriously disabled woman, on the so-called 'Fourth Plinth', the empty fourth pedestal in London's busy Trafalgar Square.

A striking feature of Quinn's work is its diversity. It is almost always figurative in its appearance but conceptual in its tone. Besides traditional materials such as marble and lead, other materials, more unusual in artworks, such as bread, ice, blood, rubber and even DNA, also contribute to the exceptional character of his oeuvre. The central theme in his work and interviews deals with what it is like to be a living creature, and which kind of relief and significance, in biological and philosophical terms, can be allocated to that life in its relationship to the world. The wonder of life itself is expressed in all kinds of sub-themes and forms.¹

HIS OWN BODY

Quinn began his own career with figures for which he consistently took his own body as the starting point. This began around the end of the eighties when he used his own hands as models for a series of hands



MARC QUINN, GARDEN, 2000

made of dough, and baked them in an oven. Other body parts followed and he began to use materials that his own body produced as the basis for his work. *Self* fulfilled a key role in Quinn's oeuvre and has now itself become an icon. It is a theme that runs as a leitmotiv through his work. As mentioned, *Self* is a head that fits into the art-historical tradition of the sculpted self-portrait. In contrast, its constituent substance, blood, is absolutely extraordinary, making the figure frozen proof of the insatiable urge for innovation within the tradition of visual art.

Blood is a specific material that evokes contrasting reactions. It does essential work within the body, of course, and is the symbol of vitality. Outside the body, blood and the corresponding red colour is an alarm signal associated with pain, suffering and death. In order not to suffer from the loss of blood, Quinn had the necessary five litres – precisely the contents of an adult – tapped off at safe intervals. With *Self*, Quinn concretizes this contrast between internal and external. Above all, he is emphasizing the vulnerability of life, which is further underlined by the fact that the figure, in its icy form, is completely dependent on a display freezer in order to survive. *Self* is an artwork on life support, just like all life actually.

LIFE AND DEATH

Quinn's great fondness of biological scraps of information is also expressed in a remarkable artwork for which not only Quinn's own head again functioned as the model, but also a frog played a key role. He created this work for the *Time Machine* exhibition in the British Museum. The frog was a *Rana Sylvatica*, or a North American wood frog. This creature, which only occurs in the northern hemisphere, has the exceptional characteristic that when the weather freezes it also allows itself to become frozen, and when the thaw comes it awakes from its hibernation. The artist, fascinated by this phenomenon, acquired a deeply cooled but not yet frozen frog via a university. He placed the frog in a perspex replica of his own head, exactly at the spot where, in terms of evolution,

our oldest brain area is located – the reptilian brain. The frog spent the winter in a frozen state on the small platform and was kept at the appropriate temperature for the duration of the exhibition.

Rubber Soul, as the work is called, was exhibited in the Egyptology section, between the collection of mummies, where the frog showed itself to be the equivalent of the living dead, with the difference that an earthly existence still awaited it. At the end of the exhibition, the frog was re-animated and sent to the zoo in London. ‘What is life, what is death?’ the artist asked his public.

SHIT AND LEAD

For those to whom this all sounds rather abstract, the *Shitpaintings* will probably offer more straightforwardness. With this work, Quinn confronts the viewer with his or her ingrained ideas of certain substances and their emotional value. As the title indicates, the *Shitpaintings* (1997) were created using faeces. In a gesture of liberation, the shit was applied manually to the canvas which had already been sealed at the back. Generally abstract in their character, with the clear handprints as the only figurative element, the works seem to refer to finger painting in one’s early childhood, the period in which embarrassment and shame do not yet play a role, and shit does not yet have a charged significance but is rather a wonderful, self-produced substance. The work is an indictment of the oppressive, culturally imposed structures that regard the body as unclean and physical secretions as loathsome, with the result that the civilization process alienates people from themselves and condemns them to be prisoners in their own bodies.

Using another substance, Quinn intensified the visualization and the representation of internal, mental, and occasionally deeply emotional processes. A series of seven figures (on long-term loan to the Groninger Museum) that he implemented in lead belong to the most autobiographic works he has produced up to the present. They were inspired by the period in which Quinn was struggling to overcome his alcohol addiction. This series is called *Emotional Detox*, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1995). The title refers to the seven mortal sins as formulated by the thirteenth-century scholar Thomas Aquinas: lust, greed, jealousy, anger, sloth, avarice, and vanity. As if tormented by invisible powers, the figures, which are all torsos of Quinn himself, seem to be engaged in a terrible struggle with themselves. They appear to squeeze, beat and strangle themselves, they grimace and distort themselves into every possible twist and turn. With one figure the head has been turned 180° and another one pulls the head off the body completely. In all the

figures, which are partly opened up, the grating-like structure of the carcass is visible in the rump. Again the material used has been carefully selected. Lead, a heavy, poisonous substance, is surrounded by obscure symbolism and is also a well-known metal in alchemy. The process in which one attempts to convert lead into gold is not only a metaphor for the purification of substances but also for the cleansing of the human spirit. *Emotional Detox* deals with that process and is thus also a reference to his emotional need in the fight against alcohol. The work is not a literal report of that time and is more a matter of universal issues, such as the complex and occasionally difficult relationship between body and soul, emotions and reason.

RADICAL CHANGE: THE OTHER PERSON AS A MODEL

Toward the end of the nineties, ten years after the artist had begun using himself as the starting point for all his work, he made a radical change: other people and things became his models. First of all, he took the language of flowers for several of his most remarkable works.

Eternal Spring is the name of this splendid series consisting of showcases, each containing a bunch of flowers. But whereas the viewer thinks that he or she is looking at a bouquet of fresh flowers, he or she is actually looking at a perfectly preserved lifeless object. The showcase, which is actually a tank, is almost invisibly filled to the top with crystal-clear silicon oil, an exceptional material that remains liquid down to 80 degrees below zero. The flowers, which died as soon as they came into contact with the cooled liquid, are immortalized at the pinnacle of their beauty, as if they are in an artificial womb – just as long as the plug remains in the socket.

FELLOW HUMANS AS MODELS

Toward the end of the nineties, Quinn also began to use his fellow humans as models. Keeping classical sculptures in mind, he realized several series that are on display in this current exhibition. With these remarkable series, he researched themes such as beauty, tradition, art and science. When walking through a gallery of classical statues in a museum one day, Quinn wondered how people would react to statues of people who missed all kinds of limbs, just like these statues. He suspected that, in contrast to the Venus de Milo, for example, these people would certainly not be regarded as ideal beauties. He was fascinated by the idea that art can represent an ideal of beauty by means of something that is regarded as being almost unacceptable in real life. His series *The Complete Marbles* (1999-2001) researches this circumstance more critically. To reinforce his point further, he used

blinding-white, unstained marble, the medium that is a symbol of the social-culturally accepted Western standard of beauty.

Via adverts, the artist came into contact with all kinds of people who missed one or more limbs, either as a result of an accident or because they were born that way. He made casts of them which he subsequently had Italian stonemasons copy in perfect marble. Although more subtle than the *Shitpaintings*, it is again work that challenges the viewer to confront his or her own ingrained prejudices concerning beauty and ugliness. The series came to a climax with the *Fourth Plinth* project, where Quinn created a work for the empty pedestal in London’s busy Trafalgar Square. It was a statue of a pregnant Alison Lapper, a seriously disabled woman without arms and with very short legs, who, as a proud, pregnant woman, as a new heroine and optimistic symbol of the future, is the counterpart of other male war heroes such as Lord Nelson, who is also someone with an amputation.

A foil to the *Complete Marbles* was the series called *Chemical Life Support* (2005), for which he selected models that had no visible shortcomings but who were completely dependent on medication for their existence. All sculptures are made from a polymer resin resembling skin. In contrast to their vertical marble variants, these sculptures lie recumbent on the ground, but the supporting pillows and blankets have been omitted so that it looks as if they are floating weightlessly above the ground. Quinn mixed the resin of each separate individual with the exact daily dosage of medication needed to keep the person in question alive. The resin statues are thus a kind of chemical equivalent of their living models.

Another series, *Flesh* (2004), which is also represented in the exhibition, again demonstrates Quinn’s fascination with unusual material. He created works in animal carcasses which he then froze and cast in bronze. At first sight, these works call to mind the renowned works of Rodin and the tradition of impressionist sculpture. Quinn deliberately uses titles that come from art-historical tradition, such as *Mother and Child (Lamb and Rabbit)*, or *Standing Figure (Beef) 2004*, or *Reclining Figure (Venison)*. The epithets between brackets stand in sharp contrast to the traditional forms of human values that these titles normally represent, and may even evoke vague discomfort. This feeling may become even stronger when the viewer realizes he or she is looking at a carcass that has been twisted into human form by the artist. It makes it painfully obvious just how ruthlessly humans use nature for their own ends and how far we have exceeded the point of no return.²

HUMANS AND NATURE

The relationship between humans and nature, in the variant of humans and science, is also visible in another work conspicuous because of its exceptional use of material. The National Portrait Gallery approached Quinn to make a portrait of the prominent scientist Sir John Sulston, a Nobel Prize winner and a leading figure in international research on the human genome. Instead of creating a classical sculpture, or at least a figurative work, as is usually the case for this museum, the artist grasped the opportunity to portray the scientist by means of the latest DNA cloning technology. For this purpose, Quinn used some sperm from Sulston to breed various bacterial colonies on a Petri dish, which are visible as a kind of jelly-like beads. The portrait, although it is unrecognizable, is the most lifelike portrait in the museum and is a direct representation of Sulston’s genetic code. Such DNA is not only responsible for Sulston’s talented brain but also for the vital statistics of supermodel Kate Moss, whom Quinn immortalized in a recent sculpture, *Sphinx* (2005). The title refers to a mythical creature that is a cross between a lion and a human. The sculpture shows Moss in an impossible yoga position. It is not clear whether or not she has now found equilibrium or is struggling to free herself from an uncomfortable situation. It is also difficult to say whether Quinn is using this present-day beauty symbol to tell a story of the coercive fashion world and the scandal papers, or whether Moss, as a modern sphinx, is presenting the riddles of our own era.

These questions on our times and our existence form an inexhaustible source of inspiration to Quinn. In addition, his oeuvre is comprehensively based on science. Quinn’s work issues from his solid admiration and appreciation of life and the realization that its value is intimately connected with its transience. The way in which Quinn covers these complex issues in his work and induces the viewer into his deceptively easily read figurative visual language is the core of his artistic calling, making him one of the most interesting present-day artists. With his work, he rewrites art history from the inside, producing a modern interplay of question-and-answer covering the major issues in life.

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¹ GERMANO CELANT (ED.), MARC QUINN, EXHIB. CAT. FONDAZIONE PRADA MILAN 2000, P.7.
² ROD MENGHAM, THE (IN)COMPLETE MARBLES, MARC QUINN, RECENT SCULPTURE, GRONINGEN-ROTTERDAM, 2006.