

# Bring me the head of Marc Quinn!

Essay by Will Self

I first encountered Marc Quinn's sculpture *Self* (popularly known as the 'blood head'), at the Saatchi Gallery's *Young British Artists II* in 1993. It's difficult now, over a decade-and-a-half on, to appreciate the impact that the Saatchi shows at his Boundary Road gallery in north London had. Since the iconic *Frieze* show, mounted by Damien Hirst in 1988 at an empty warehouse on the Isle of Dogs, the pulse of change in the British contemporary art scene had been quickening; however, it took the intervention of Saatchi – as a collector at once munificent and ebullient – to concentrate the world's gaze on what was a remarkable burgeoning of creative talent.

*Self* was initially conceived by Marc Quinn for a solo show, put on by Jay Jopling (who remains one of Quinn's gallerists) in 1991. Exhibited together with the blood head, were a series of 'bread hand' pieces. At this time the artist was working extensively with bread as a medium – and perhaps part of the hidden calculus of Quinn's inspiration was this Eucharistic formula: bread = body; alcohol = blood. However, manifestly, the idea for *Self* was a pure *donné*. Quinn told me during a conversation we had recently at his Clerkenwell studio: 'I was interested in freezing as a methodology during that period. I felt that while sculpture necessarily existed outside of time, freezing *stopped* time, and so made this explicit. To begin with I couldn't think of anything that interesting to freeze, but then one morning I woke up and there it was, entire in my mind: a cast of my own head made from my own frozen blood.'

Hearing this, I thought back to that first *vis-à-vis* with *Self*. Certainly the broad ramp coated with durable beige emulsion that led down to the Saatchi Gallery was suggestive of the entrance to a tomb at once ancient and futuristic – as were the steel gates you steeped through to access it. The shrewdly asymmetric, minimalist spaces of the gallery's interior spread out from a smallish antechamber – but there, mounted in a transparent plexi-glass box, atop its freezer cabinet, and set in the middle of the room, was this head, not a bust – with all the formal and historic properties that such physical cropping entails – but a head, *sans phrase*, staring with sanguine ataraxy (and for once the intensifier 'literally' is acceptable here), at the visitors passing ephemerally before its eyes.

And yes, I understood at once that *Self* existed outside time, was both from the distant past – a relic, a disinterred thing, a mythic object – and from the yet to be conceived of future, existing as it did solely by virtue of life-support technology. The mythic is a dimension that Quinn remains preternaturally attuned to, and when I put it to him that this piece, which I had been warned about in hushed tones – 'Have you heard about this artist who's had his own blood..?' – long before I saw it, probably best exemplified his aesthetic of enacted literalism, he didn't demur: 'Yes, I like to make a process intelligible – and *Self*, because of its very continuity, and its several incarnations, has now, almost unavoidably, become the artery that runs through my work. It was the first of my mature pieces, but the aim persists; if you consider my fragmented marble sculptures, which themselves depict people who do, in fact, have no arms or legs, then they also enact literalism.'

Quinn spoke of literalism as 'One of the best and most underrated ways of making sense of the world', but we agreed that the essence of that understanding was the very metaphoric nature of reality itself. In 1993 I stared at *Self* and *Self* gazed back at me – if such a thing can be said of eyes turbid with their own constituent substance. The surface of the blood head was pitted and fissured, as if it were coagulated – scabbed as much as frozen – while this patina seemed to hold fused within itself the mineral, the organic and the artificial, rendering the ascription of any particular provenance altogether fatuous.

*previous spread:*

**Self** (detail)

1991

Blood, stainless steel, perspex  
and refrigeration equipment

208 × 63 × 63 cm

(81 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>10</sub> × 24 <sup>4</sup>/<sub>5</sub> × 24 <sup>4</sup>/<sub>5</sub> in.)

*opposite:*

**Cloned Blood**

2009

Watercolour and pencil on paper

76.5 × 57 cm

(30 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 22 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.)

Again, this was at a time when critics could, quite casually, aver that the London contemporary art scene ‘was dead’, while Charles Saatchi splashing out £20,000 on works by new young artists could make front page news. *Young British Artists II* was not an insignificant show – there were powerful works by Sarah Lucas and Mark Wallinger as well as Quinn, yet, there in the wrack, left behind by the high tide of pelf that in the subsequent decade swamped the art market, *Self* remains. Remains, canted over at an odd angle on this terminal beach, like the buried Statue of Liberty at the end of the film *Planet of the Apes*, a minatory warning of the consequences.

‘It depends on my life to be created – it’s made from the substance of me; and so I think of it as the purest form of sculpture – to sculpt your own body, from your own body. The recent works I’ve been making, involving people who are engaged in extreme body modification – plastic surgery, tattooing, sex-change operations – these made me think about it again; they are, if you like, the naïve artists who are working in the same medium, while my art is the culturally-mediated version of an art that is primitive in the best sense of the word.’

Flesh and blood – the obvious self-referential meanings of *Self*, its evocation of Romantic suffering and the transmutation of the life into the work are not lost on Quinn, nor does he recoil – as he may have in the past – from more obvious psychoanalytic interpretation: ‘My life was extreme in the early 1990s, and I think it’s obvious that a young artist will also look for an extreme statement to put himself on the map.’ I wondered if Quinn’s own alcohol dependence during this period had also formed part of the psychological petri dish within which *Self* was cultured?

‘Certainly *Self* is about the idea of dependence; that just as the addict is dependent on his drug, so the blood head cannot survive without electricity. Nevertheless, I’ve always thought of this being a piece about life rather than death – there is something interesting about blood, about the way it renews itself; it’s not like chopping a limb off. It’s this renewal that I’ve focused on in other works involving body parts – such as the placenta.’

Control – and the absence of control implied by addiction, is central to *Self*; and the resonance that the work – in all its four avatars – continues to have down to the present day, is evidence for Quinn of the mounting dependence of society as a whole on infrastructure that retains form and content in a sterile equilibrium. However, for the artwork – viewed as such a synecdoche – equilibrium was difficult to achieve. Quinn found a doctor who was prepared to take the necessary blood – ten pints over five sessions – and he remains involved in the process to this day. Whatever squeamishness the artist himself may have had was overcome by the creative impulse. That ten pints of frozen blood was exactly the amount required to mould the artist’s head was quite unforeseen – an astonishing serendipity. *Siren*, Quinn’s cast gold statue of the model Kate Moss was a later example of such strange coincidences: the weight of the materials being the same as its subject’s bodyweight; the value of the materials – at then current market prices – was also exactly one million pounds sterling.

Quinn acknowledges the oddness, but it’s in character that he’s dismissive of any mystery, quipping that: ‘You’re only looking at the works that *are* serendipitous, somewhere I have a whole load of ones that aren’t.’ Certainly, the actual making of *Self* revealed a messier praxis. There was no opportunity to experiment with the material, or devise an appropriate methodology; operations that would have been difficult in the research laboratories of a large corporation, were carried out in distinctly

insalubrious surroundings. The first *Self* was thus cast straight out of the mould and put on show in its display cabinet at -18°C. But while initially the sculpture looked exactly as the artist intended, after a week on display it was clear that there were problems: the air was getting to the blood, vaporising the water content of it, and carrying this to the coldest part of the closed system, the cooling element.

*Self* was disintegrating and became, Quinn told me: 'An incredibly stressful sculpture to have existing.' The metaphor of dependence had acquired a sinister life of its own, and begun to parasitise – like a Frankenstein monster – on its creator. 'Whenever the phone rang I thought it was going to be the gallery, saying "you've got to come down and sort it out, it's melting"'. It was like having a terminally ill friend, and the image of dependency I'd created had become awfully dependent on me.'

In fact, *Self* had to be thawed out and re-moulded no fewer than four times before Quinn developed an interim technical solution: a silicone tegument within the mould that then adhered to the surface of the blood head. By the time I encountered *Self* at the Saatchi Gallery it was wearing its transparent facemask – yet this was not the end. The baleful and pitted visage was the result of pinprick holes appearing in the silicone, then widening and exposing the coagulated blood to the air. It wasn't until 1996, when the second *Self* was made, that a final stabilisation was achieved by immersing the head in liquid silicone at -18°C, which provided a complete prophylactic between blood and air.

Initially, Quinn had thought that the pre-existing blood head should be maintained in its unstable state, however the evolving life of *Self* had begun to interest him quite as much as its initial conception: praxis and piece had fused. 'I wanted to see it perfect; not a perfect likeness, but a perfect cast. I liked the crystalline feel of the head, it seemed to me to be a precious stone – albeit mineralised, and I was conscious of the iron content of the blood, how its frozen state enhanced the oxidation of the blood, how its stasis was kind of rusting, making of it a liquid cast iron sculpture.'

This hard-won equilibrium between elemental states gives *Self* another mythic dimension. Quinn, as ever, is keen to embrace whatever narratives the work may generate – no matter however spurious; and when, a few years ago, the rumour began circulating that the original 1991 *Self*, (at that time still owned by Saatchi), had melted after its freezer unit was accidentally switched off by the collector's wife, the celebrity chef Nigella Lawson, he took this as an expression of a collective – although submerged – desire for elements to retain their discretion: 'When something is solid and its natural state is liquid you unconsciously want it to be liquid again. While, of course, this is probably the only sculpture in the world that, were you to smash it, would make it seem as if you'd committed a murder.'

A curious aspect of *Self*'s impact on the viewer, is that despite being a pure work of self-portraiture (a view that Quinn enthusiastically embraces), it seems altogether void of either ego or the crudely experiential: this is neither akin to the narcissistic self-referencing of so much contemporary work, nor is it an attempt to use the artist's physical form as a canvas on to which are daubed the brushstrokes of life. Rather, *Self* seems to me to have greater kinship with votive statues, especially those in Eastern and traditional religions, that are believed to act as vessels for the godhead, into which its essence may be decanted.

Certainly, Quinn has never shied away from the religious implications of his work. He seems to view himself as a Michelangelo in the court of Mammon, called upon to produce iconography for a secularised religion



that worships money, power, celebrity, and the medical preservation of life. His simulacra take on an odd life of their own, accreting myth in the same way as Shiva, Jesus, or Dracula. All this, Quinn acknowledges, was implicit in *Self*, 1991, but it took the evolving counter-life of the piece, and its subsequent versions – one every five years, a rate of production the artist is committed to maintaining throughout his working lifetime – for these meanings to stand proud of the bloody mask.

This was an evolving counter-life that included travel as a key component; just as votive statues are taken into the temple, and thereby acquire a ritual status, in order to act as portals between the noumenal and phenomenal realms, so the quadripartite *Self* has journeyed to the four corners of the world. The most recent incarnation of the piece, *Self*, 2006, has been bought – after considerable controversy – by the National Portrait Gallery in London, which already owns the artist's 'Genomic Portrait' of Sir John Sulston. The original 1991 piece is now owned by the American collector Steve Cohen; *Self*, 1996 by Harold Rachofsky and the Dallas Museum of Art; while *Self*, 2001 has gone east, it was bought by Mr Kim, a South Korean collector and founder of the Arario Gallery.

Quinn obviously relishes this dispersion of the work, and sees this as the teasing out of another mythic strand: the worshipful acts of mass travel and consumption that have been fundamental to the contemporary faith in globalisation. And now all four *Selves* are returning to Europe for the Basel show, while for the artist this seems like a literal enactment of inspiration: the drawing in of the Holy Spirit of art.

This gathering, which Quinn wryly remarks, will feature: 'Five lots of my blood with one in circulation', has also involved a further re-engineering of the pieces. Only recently has a further technical problem: the misting of the heated glass (heated in order to preserve its transparency) been solved. He realised that this was occurring due to changes in air pressure in the cargo hold during air freight transport of the cabinets which was causing minute warping in the seals of the glass. The artist instead now has had the cabinets taken by road and sea to Switzerland.

There seems a strange congruence between this morphing and movement of the works, and the original act that gave them embodiment: the taking of the artist's blood. Of this, Quinn says, 'It's an interesting feeling, and it's not often when making an artwork that you have the physical sensation of something leaving your body.' If this is a nod to what he deems the 'cyber-ironic version of the true artistic path', it is equally a font – and microcosm – of the global circulation of the works so created.

Quinn remains preoccupied by the way *Self* (he views all four blood heads as being parts of the same work), relates to time; these alternate versions allow for alternate time lines, and so highlight the roles of contingency and chance in human life. As to the future, the artist has spoken of his intention to have his blood drained on his deathbed so that a final blood head may be made. However, in conversation, he emphasised that any eschatology of the work remains inchoate; and spoke of perhaps making a much larger blood sculpture – or even of using cloning to in some way reproduce blood heads *ad infinitum*. His resistance to any end-state for *Self* struck me as being – quite understandably – related to his level of identification with the work.

'My primary objective remains to create works that both delight and are profound,' he said. 'It is somewhere in the mirrored oppositions of transgression and guiltless pleasure that the battery of my ideas discloses itself.' As if to confirm this sentiment, Quinn began to muse on the possible artworks that might derive from all the four owners of the



separate parts of *Self* being in the same room at the same time: ‘It’s important that works such as this sell for a lot of money,’ he said. ‘Because that ensures that they’re looked after properly; but at the same time, this confirms an outmoded paradigm, the idea that the artist should suffer – while the buyer should pay. It may be that I propose to the collectors that they give me *their* blood, so that I can make a work out of it. That way they both suffer *and* pay.’

And that, as much as any other possible formulation, seems a plausible credo for a free market in terminal disarray: a taking of *caveat emptor* to its logical and absurdist conclusion. Quinn’s *Self* which has stared out from its silicone-filled cabinet at the world for almost two decades now, has seen much of the folly of Man. The imminent arrival in London of the *Younger Memnon*, the monumental statue of Ramesses II, is thought to have inspired Shelley to write his *Ozymandias*. Even before he set eyes on the Pharaoh’s stony countenance, the poet was transfixed by its ataraxy – an indifference that seemed to defy time itself. It is to this lineage that *Self* belongs: a work that is preceded by a mythic shock wave, and which when finally revealed, stuns its viewers into submission, as they prostrate themselves before the incarnation of their own godless mortality.

*Will Self, London, 2009*