

Looking for Beauty in the Breaking Storm: Marc Quinn and the Aesthetics of Destruction

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“As there are certain hollow blasts of wind and secret swellings of seas before a tempest, so are there in states.”

Francis Bacon, ‘Of Seditious and Troubles’ (1625)

“The onrush of a conquering force is like the bursting of pent-up waters into a chasm a thousand fathoms deep.”

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, (c. 600 BC)

Between the earth and the air

You are standing at dawn with your back to the land looking out to the sea. This, the shoreline, is a limit, a crossing point: a border between countries and habitats. Standing here, your view is one of the world divided into its basic elements – earth, water, air – arranged in perfect ratio around the flaming eye of the rising sun. You look down. In the sand around your feet is evidence of ancient life forms; prehistoric marine invertebrates the spiralling intricate shells of which seem eloquent of some deep mathematics. Here too is human debris – lone sandals, blank bottles, polystyrene and other shreds from the acres of seaborne plastic waste. You look up to the sky; an aeroplane is flying in.

This view is just a picture: zoom into it until it fragments into dots, the image exploding beyond the limits of digital detail into a huge sprawl of shattered colour, which still faithfully traces the familiar shapes of the view out to sea. Details – of geographic specificity, of signs of plant or animal life – are erased; the composition is reduced to its most basic colours and forms, becoming a vision of nature, abstracted.

We encounter Marc Quinn at this liminal point. *Violence and Serenity* opens with *Before and After Humans*, 2013 (pages 54–55), a series portraying elemental drama in which the trapped subaquatic spume of plunging waves is shown tracing tortured arcs through sunlit water with all the apocalyptic verve of John Martin’s purifying flames. Unlike Martin’s vast narrative canvasses, what we see here is depopulated (or perhaps pre-populated) – there is no human to anchor the scale save the one looking in from beyond the canvas. Abstracted and stripped of relatable detail (of geography, of life forms) they become portraits of ambivalent force – the endlessly repeating trauma of the elements being smashed into one another with each breaking wave, little affected, it seems, by whether this is indeed before or after humans.

Before and After Humans were painted from photographs commissioned by Quinn, taken by a diver beneath breaks off the coast of Australia. We enter these subaquatic scenes from this precarious perspective. As a static image, still and silent, somehow calming, the billows created by the wave force are

mesmerising, like the delicately tinted mushroom clouds of Edgerton, Germeshausen & Grier’s silent colour films of 1950s nuclear detonations. Rendered in the immaculate, airbrushed detail common to many of Quinn’s recent bodies of work, the humanlessness of the *Before and After Humans* paintings appears to extend to their fabrication; painted without the apparent touch of a hand.

While the series *The Toxic Sublime*, 2014 (pages 24–31) also addresses the aesthetic lure of the littoral zone, here the human hand is everywhere apparent. Each founded on the same non-specific photograph of a beachscape at sunrise – a generic ‘tropical paradise’ image of nature at its most superficially attractive (and commodifiable) – the vastly overexpanded printed image is crumpled, crushed, abraded, sprayed and defaced over and over again. The same human hand that so reverently captured the image of ‘unspoilt’ nature has then all but destroyed it, leaving rasterised dashes of the original form occasionally visible between the gestural impact marks. Like the spray-painted graffiti used to leave personal marks on impersonal urban spaces, Quinn’s mark-making in *The Toxic Sublime* is both destructive and creative – it’s also a radical departure from the almost machine-like perfection of recent series such as *Before and After Humans*. “It’s finding the hand again,” Quinn explains. “It’s a physical re-engagement with the world.”

Mounted on two-metre-high sheets of aluminium that have been further buckled and folded with manual force, *The Toxic Sublime* cease to be pictures, and transform into sculptural objects on which the remnants of a picture are visible. In their scale the tortured aluminium plates resemble segments of airplane fuselage; these relics of an image also suggest themselves to be relics of an object or evidence of incident. The fuzzy, barely discernible seascape adhering to the surface hinting at an alluring destination never reached – a fatal inducement to travel as well as evidence of a homogenised mass-tourism industry scooping people up and spewing out them around the world.

With a nod to the relational use of the human figure in romantic landscape painting, Quinn brings the human image into *The Toxic Sublime* via mirrored strips of tape stuck to the horizon line of each warped and occluded image. Reflecting the gallery visitor, in images as creased and fragmented as the original seascape has become, the tape becomes at once a point of entry into the surface image, and a resistant addition to the works as sculpture – reminiscent of the livery stripe of a commercial airline, they add to the objectness.

The sublime is that which takes us to the limit point – *sub limen* – it suggests elements of nature or art that are numinous, awe-inspiring, up to or even beyond the limits of understanding,

‘Is that what art is – a way of surviving the terror of the world by finding beauty in it in the moment before you’re destroyed by it?’

Marc Quinn

and which carry with them a sense of terror or dread. The sublime aesthetic in *The Toxic Sublime* is not merely the beauty of nature but the imaging of disaster – spectacular, terrifying, beyond understanding, yet strangely compelling. This toxic sublime has become a defining feature of the contemporary experience; the age of ever-present rolling news has generated its own aesthetics of disaster, with ‘iconic’ images of massive human tragedy swiftly emerging through the filters of the news cycle. “When you watch something on 24-hour news – a catastrophic, destructive event – it’s terrible the first time, but after you’ve watched it 50 times it starts to become abstracted and you begin to appreciate, despite yourself, the aesthetic aspects of it,” says Quinn. Proliferating across multiple image platforms, coverage of shocking world events have become a backdrop to everyday life, the images ever-changing and yet curiously generic, the constant updates by turns addictive and in their unwavering urgency, easy to ignore. “You can almost imagine if the world does explode, you’d somehow find it beautiful at the same time as terrible. Is that what art is – a way of surviving the terror of the world by finding beauty in it in the moment before you’re destroyed by it?”

Constantly unravelling scenes of disaster become the literal backdrop to *The Sound of Silence*, 2013 (pages 81–85), an eight-metre-wide, four-metre-high mobile of tumbling, crashing aeroplanes shown spotlit in a darkened room, their cast shadows depicting a chilling dreamscape. Planes in flight are a traditional motif in mobiles for small children – comforting nursery structures placed above the cot to lull with their movement – here they become the source of horror and anxiety. The aluminium Boeing and Airbus aircraft of Quinn’s disquieting mobile were cast from hobby construction kits: complex scale models sold in plastic parts for home assembly from a manufacturer that has been popular with American children since the 1950s. The toy of a prepubescent rather than a small child, they suggest a generation that has grown up with the image of the aeroplane as a source of horror and threat rather than the symbol of weightlessness, adventure and escape that it once was. Each generation of children has its particular nightmares – the falling plane pollutes the sleep of this one.

A quiet backdrop of flames

Sitting in his London studio, Marc Quinn opens a notebook and starts to read out loud “About suffering they were never wrong,/ The old Masters: how well they understood/Its human position; how it takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along...” W.H. Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts* accompanies the poet through paintings by Pieter Breughel the Elder. Each shows a tumultuous, world-changing

event – the census at Bethlehem, the fall of Icarus – taking place as the quotidian life of a sixteenth-century Flemish village continues all around. There is here both the uncanny, focused quietude of a conflict zone in those moments in which the inhabitants try to keep going as normal, and a reminder of how history can be made in our presence unnoticed.

In the summer of 2011, as rioting spread through neighbourhoods around London, for much of the city, even for those in adjacent districts, the events were visible only via a television or computer screen. Shop windows were smashed and their contents looted, buildings were set on fire and mobs clashed with the police, while only kilometres down the road life went on uninterrupted. From the north of London the civil unrest spread to within a few kilometres of Quinn’s home. “We couldn’t even hear anything, everything was completely normal,” recalls Quinn. “When you’re in that moment you feel the whole world is resonating to it, but in fact...”

The iconography of the riots was quickly defined by figures in hooded tops – garments already associated with criminal youth in the British press – their faces masked, standing against a backdrop of flames. One defining image was that of a burly man dressed in a grey Adidas tracksuit, hood up, face masked and wearing gloves, strolling with apparent insouciance across the road as a car burned furiously in the background. This anonymous figure appears in three of Quinn’s works: *Id*, 2012, *History Painting (London, 8 August 2011)* ROYBWN, 2011 and the tapestry *The Creation of History (London, 8 August 2011)*, 2012 (pages 90–93, 109 and 12). The two-metre-high *Id* presents this figure aggrandised, like the military commanders of historic campaigns that are scattered around central London’s imperial squares and boulevards. Instead of majestic bronze, this figure is rendered in concrete – the material that defines the urban battleground of cheaply erected post-war housing estates, stagnating shopping centres and car parks – an anonymous ‘unknown soldier’ seemingly birthed from the very fabric of the disenfranchised outer city boroughs.

One spur behind the *History* series was Quinn’s interest in the historical tableau as a glorifying construct, a highly subjective self-mythologising spectacle created by the victorious party with the ‘facts’ of battle presented as a *fait accompli*. Rather than the rolling news images acting as an omnipresent metaphorical backdrop to contemporary life, the charges, explosions and pandemonium of great historical painting served as a literal backdrop. The excoriation of the 2011 London rioters in the British media, and the unprecedented speed and harshness of the sentencing meted out to those who participated in looting, was at the time symptomatic of a press tendency to



The Creation of History
(Athens, 6 December 2009)
2014
Tapiz Jacquard/Jacquard tapestry
250 x 184 cm

The Creation of History
(Athens, 29 June 2011)
2014
Tapiz Jacquard/Jacquard tapestry
250 x 180 cm

vilify unemployed urban youths, who were variously depicted as benefits scroungers, disruptive elements, and possibly criminal, and who, in the case of young black men, were the disproportionately common subjects of police ‘stop and search’ procedures.¹

The belittling objectification of young urban manhood is approached again in the series *Life Breathes the Breath*, 2012 (pages 61–62), in which a trio of tracksuited figures – hoods up, caps on, faces largely obscured – are shown in a variety of poses, each contemplating a skull. Drawing on Francisco de Zurbarán’s many depictions of *Saint Francis in Meditation* (1635–39) (fig.1), here the hoods become reinterpreted as a monk’s cowl, the baggy anonymity of the outsized tracksuit as penitential robes, the silent listlessness as quiet meditation, the contemplation of death as evidence of deep interior life.

In *Id* as in the subsequent *History* series, Quinn is superficially portraying history on behalf of the underdog, yet things are never that simple. The photographs on which *Id* and the *History* series were based were taken by press photographers, the image rights purchased for publication by Quinn from an agency, following the same route as would the picture editor of a newspaper. In other words – these were photographs taken for commercial ends, in the full understanding of what made a good story and of the political climate of the moment. When we look at images such as this – the ones that become emblematic of an event, that are reproduced over and over again, what is it exactly that we are seeing? It is impossible to know to what degree the image and its context have been manipulated. It can simultaneously be a piece of objective reportage and a scenario that has sprung free of its original context and intent, and come to represent a much larger moment in history. When working on the model for *Id*, Quinn and his team purchased an identical tracksuit to that worn by the figure in the photograph. When trying to locate the mask worn by the figure it was found to be police-issue, raising the question of whether the most iconic image of the riots might actually have been of a policeman, and adding further ambiguity, for Quinn, to how this image could be read.

A similar rupture between origin and symbol has occurred with the source image for *Vice as an Object of Virtue*, 2010 (page 87). The masked and wired figure has become synonymous with the exposure, in late 2003, of the massive human rights abuses committed by US forces in Abu Ghraib prison, a culture of ritual (often sexual) humiliation and mockery as an apparent source of entertainment, the complicity of the Bush administration in serious violations of international humanitarian law, and the subsequent exposure of the officially sanctioned use of ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ on detainees assumed to be enemy

combatants. When the photograph was used on the front cover of *The Economist* magazine in May 2004 it was with a strapline aimed squarely at Washington rather than Baghdad: ‘Resign, Rumsfeld’ – within six months, the image had transformed from simple documentation of one man’s suffering in Iraq into a piece of political leverage in the US. “Somehow to make it again as a real three-dimensional image rescued it from abstraction in some way,” explains Quinn.

The potency of the image, too, comes from an aesthetic that, intentionally or otherwise, transcends the specifics of its time and place – the coarse robe has overtones of hermitage or asceticism, the pointed mask relates to the hoods worn by Catholic penitents in Spain during Holy Week, and the pose of the figure, with arms held wide and palms turned heavenward, is one associated with prayer in early Christian art. Quinn also sees in it echoes of the Hellenic sculpture of Laocoön and his sons writhing in agony as they wrestle sea serpents. In *Vice as an Object of Virtue* the implicit religious associations of the image are brought to the fore. Cast in silver – a material associated with votive offerings, objects of worship and the cladding of icons – this contemporary ‘icon’ becomes a kind of martyr figure, the struggle of the individual subsumed by a larger historical narrative. This figure that inadvertently exposed cruelty and malfeasance is transformed into a literally saint-like object, while also betokening the vicious means adopted in pursuit of an apparently virtuous objective.

The *History Painting* series (pages 100–107) again explores the muddled world of representation – what the lone individual represents in a self-consciously ‘historical’ artwork as well as what that individual represents on the ground, caught up in urban skirmish as one component in a much larger political battle. Pictured on the streets of Kiev, Istanbul, Athens, Cairo, Rio de Janeiro, Hyderabad, London, Quinn’s figures are not part of the same fight, and while they may have overlapping motivations, they do not share explicit aims. But in their unified aesthetic the *History Paintings* expose connections between those involved in civil unrest in locations around the world, in their portrayal in the media, and in the way that those involved in these events present themselves. These are paintings, by and large, of young men in cities. Thanks to the framing of the images they appear to be part of a world that is everywhere in flames – an urban inferno that shares its visual language with the Hollywood (or Bollywood) movie poster. Like a regular army, they share a uniform, though in this case it’s of mass ‘designer-branded’ and sports casual garb – Dolce & Gabbana underwear pokes out from low-slung trouser waistbands, Adidas stripes course down tracksuited legs like the international livery of disenfranchised

youth, eyes are masked with dark glasses, heads and faces obscured with scarves. These men are dressed up for battle. Pictured shining out against the flames and cinders, they make for romantic, heroic figures.

As with *Id*, the *History Painting* series make no pretence at objectivity – Quinn quite literally throws his lot in alongside the protestors, hurling gobs of brightly coloured paint across the photorealist surface of the airbrushed canvasses. The colours are those used within the underlying picture – the material of the image itself shattered, raw, back across its surface in echo of the gestural dynamic within – the greens and yellows of the Brazilian flag arc like fireworks over the head of an anonymous Guy Fawkes-masked figure on the streets of Rio; flaming white, red and turquoise explode off the shield of an armoured policeman in Athens; against an otherworldly background of pulpy black earth, cinder and billowing smoke, the charred remains of an ornamental balustrade still curling elegantly in the forecorner, hot jets of pink and orange dazzle the air around protestors in Kiev.

The explicit role of the human hand in the making of history is underscored in *Towards a New Geography (Orebody)*, 2014 (pages 88–89). Here again, Quinn casts paint across the ‘finished’ picture surface of a monochrome world map, the streaks and spots of black paint redrawing borders, slicing continents and occluding territories. The subtitle – *Orebody* – and the material in which this world map is literally being redrawn – oil – hint at deeper geopolitical forces at play behind the youthful physicality on display at street level.

Globally, the civil unrest of the last few years has been defined by the rapid information exchange permitted by social media platforms, which has facilitated coordinated action on the ground, and the international dissemination of grassroots reportage. The fleet, ever-changing image culture of platforms like Facebook generates an overwhelming quantity of information – all in its way as subjective as the history images of earlier eras, and almost all sliding out of view as quickly as they slide into it, obscured by the constant revelation of new images, new information. *The Creation of History* series (pages 12, 20, 95–97) translates the ephemeral image culture of rolling news, Facebook and ubiquitous picture screens into the historical, largely pre-literate information culture of the sixteenth century. Quinn had been interested in working in tapestry for a few years before *The Creation of History* series, but had bided his time for the right subject matter: “I wanted to find an image or series of images that somehow engaged with the history of tapestry, subverted it and continued it at the same time.”

At five centuries’ remove, the historical tableaux of Flemish-woven tapestry feels solid and official, yet there is a shared aesthetic in the depiction of today’s urban battles and the explosion- and hubbub-fretted panels of tapestry suites such as the *Battle of Pavia* (c. 1528–31, after cartoons by Bernard van Orley) (fig. 2). Quinn’s tapestries are relegated to display on the floor rather than the wall. “Once you put something on the wall it becomes about commemoration and remembering,” he explains. “I felt that because they were about the world now and about anybody, that they should be on the floor and should be walked on.” They are not official history, merely a slowing down of the image cycle. Their pictures will still fade and disappear, scuffed by the feet of gallery visitors at each subsequent exposure, the colour of the older tapestries becoming less insistent, sinking into the square grid of the weave like digital images fracturing into pixels.

The self-authored body

Self Portrait after Zubarán (The Shadow), 2014 (page 130), like the hurled paint of the *History Painting* series, shows the artist’s explicit identification with the marginalised, protesting figures while at the same time distilling the aesthetic language of these urban tribes. The hood and chiaroscuro may take their cue from Zubarán’s religious portraiture, but the triple stripe of the hoodie and masked face spring from the two edges of contemporary image culture. On the one hand a generation obsessed with creating a constantly updated visual record of itself: on the other, a generation under constant surveillance. As a protestor, from a security perspective, you want to be seen but not identified, still somehow recognisable to those close to you, both on the ground and in images.

To Quinn, the accumulation and analysis of isolated specifics of identity – via fingerprints, retinal imaging and facial recognition software – reduces human beings to a hot soup of data sets. This sense of physical material abstracted underlies both the *Flesh* series (pages 112–125) and the fingerprint and iris portraits, which for functional purposes reduce a person to the unique features of a single detail of the body. Fingerprints and irises are unique, and thus identifying, yet these portraits hold none of the suggestive, insightful depths of a face or figure study. Here the question of identity becomes binary – this is you, this is not you – there is no sense of soul or context. The human population becomes containable and easy to cope with, stripped of its particularities.

The *Flesh* series carries a much greater burden of unease, its potential to both fascinate and disgust drawing on conflicting human urges both to witness and shy away from death. In Plato’s *Republic* (c. 380 BC) Leontius’s desire to look at corpses is

‘Structural hierarchies of societies always pay people back for obedience with attention’ Marc Quinn

described as an appetite – an urging of the Id alongside the urges to fight, feed and fuck – which his rational being struggles unsuccessfully to control.² The feeling of disgust toward dead flesh is a cultural marker, part of the same learned response that causes us to shy away from human waste and disease. In the case of fresh, healthy flesh like that portrayed by Quinn, feelings of extreme revulsion point up a profound disconnect between food and the acknowledgment of its origins, a disconnect which permits a cultural sentimentalisation of animals to run concurrent with the consumption of them.

Quinn professes to find fresh flesh beautiful – he pulls up photographs on his iPad of a shark he saw brought into harbour by fishermen. On shore, they butchered it, slicing it neatly down the gullet leaving its liver and intestine to slither out onto the wet sand of the beach on a neat raft of dark blood. The innards were a delicate silky lavender colour, laced with mauve veins. Eviscerated, the shark’s skin lay wrinkled and deflated, briefly upstaged by the lustre of its internal organs in the few moments before oxidation set in.

The *Flesh* series approaches its subject as both biology and metaphor – as an object study, a series of still lives in the vanitas tradition and a commentary on humanity as abstracted by big data. Lining the walls of the museum they also re-image the art space as corpus – in seeing the inside of the body the intimation is that we are somehow inside the body.

At one extreme, the mass of exposed and ruddy muscle, fat and tendon flooding the evenly focused picture planes of the *Flesh* series extends the analytical metaphors of the anti-immigration lobbies and population control activists that see the world drowning beneath shifting waves of undesirable flesh. Flesh also brings with it the question of appetites and their denial, and the increasingly complex contemporary self-identification with the physical extent and state of the body. Sins of the flesh may once have pertained to sexual transgressions, but today flesh is more likely to be reviled for its overabundance and the bearer of the flesh for their lack of control over it. In the lexicon of Western privilege the concept of impure flesh has suffered a similar shift – the notion of impurity no longer pertains to a body tainted by sexual congress but to one tainted by chemicals, hormones, antibiotics, cooked food, caffeine, alcohol, prescription and recreational drugs.

The fetishisation of flesh takes on another aspect in *The Invention of Carving*, 2013 (pages 110–111), an onyx sculpture of a half-consumed leg of Pata Negra *jamón* made, in part, in response to bone carvings in an exhibition of Ice Age art at the British Museum in London, and to a Qing dynasty-era sculpture of a piece of cooked pork in Taipei. The Ice Age bone would have

been carved after the flesh on it had been consumed, so the first carving, as Quinn saw it, was not the carving of the bone, but the carving of the meat before it. The jasper-carved *Meat-Shaped Stone* held by the National Palace Museum of Taipei is an expression of culinary art as well as stone carving, celebrating and elevating the dish of glazed, fatty pork as a cultural object. Like the glazed pork, *jamón ibérico* has a status beyond mere foodstuff, becoming a culturally significant object, a status indicated by the complex armature in which it is supported for carving. Rendered in baby pink, the pig leg looks languid and sensual, its delicate ankle arching suggestively through a circular clamp.

Now almost two decades old, Quinn’s *Incarnate*, 1996 (page 127) is a form of personal abstraction as flesh – the artist’s blood milled into paste with oats, and processed to form a human *morcilla*. When Dieter Roth made his *Literaturwurst*, the meat was formed of the ground pages of books that the artist couldn’t stand or whose authors he wanted to annoy. For Roth the process of being homogenised into sausage meat and stuffed in a casing was a potent insult; a form of humiliation he could exact on those he wished to punish or bring low. For Quinn to use his own blood in this way is an act of abjection, and one that seems at odds with subsequent cultural flourishing of self-modification, self-invention and self-aggrandisement in the increasingly visual and networked culture. In retrospect, *Incarnate* seem prescient of Don DeLillo’s coinage ‘meat space’ (*Cosmopolis*, 2003) to describe the physical world in a culture in which that seems less compelling than the digital.

Historically, the accusation of ‘making an exhibition of yourself’ was a scolding one – a suggestion that you had exposed yourself to ridicule, and by extension embarrassed those associated with you. “Structural hierarchies of societies always pay people back for obedience with attention,” Quinn notes. Obedience earned you the permission to be visible – to stand on a raised platform and to wear fine garments or carry rare or precious objects. Attention and visibility have become a primary behavioural motivation – albeit now via image-sharing platforms and social networks.

Rendered in the grey, pitted material of the urban environment, the concrete sculptures *Zombie Boy (City)*, 2011 (pages 47–49) and *The Beauty of Healing*, 2014 (pages 41–43) present the opposite of abstract flesh – two human bodies (respectively those of Rick Genest and Laurence Sessou) that have been modified and recreated to the point of becoming self-authored artworks. Under the moniker *Zombie Boy*, Genest’s full-body tattoos have made him an international celebrity, appearing in music promos, films and fashion campaigns.



fig.3:
**Estatua de una mujer reclinada,
 denominada 'Venerina'/**
**Statue of a recumbent woman,
 nicknamed 'Venerina'**
 Clemente Susini
 1780–82
 Modelo anatómico en
 cera/Anatomical wax model

In distinguishing himself to the ultimate degree, he has created a brand founded purely on the resonance of his aesthetic. In Quinn's sculptural portrait, Genest smokes a cigarette, human and mundane, the ink of his tattoos rendered in relief, making him appear like a colourless version of one of the wax *écorché* models often presented in relaxed, lifelike poses for eighteenth-century anatomy students (fig.3). The patterning of keloid scars spread across Laurence Sessou's body were created in part as a graphic point of connection to traditional African scarification rituals – an expression of being pulled between two cultures, a child of globalisation. For both Genest and Sessou, the realisation of a self-authored physicality took on the weight of a rite of passage, including a journey through considerable pain to become remade in a modified form. While there are some echoes of religious rites – the mortification of the flesh, or use of faith to conquer pain – here the self is not something to be transcended but the actual endpoint. The ritual of scarring, marking and pain on this level lifts the individuals above the abstract flesh of humanity, creating a visibly distinct self in the ultimate, and rendering retinal scanners, facial recognition software and biometric fingerprint identification unnecessary. They are full body masks, but ones that demand visibility and recognition.

Back at the edge of the world

Quinn's iris paintings have evolved in the last few years – they're not pure, reduced-down portraits anymore, but something rather more ominous. Printed with world maps and gun sights, they surveil, measure and assess. Their lidlessness suggests a ceaseless watching. In *Map of Where You Can't See the Stars*. *Atlantic*. August 25 2013 (page 33) the monochrome eye is overlaid with a view of the occidental world at night, illuminated only by electricity grids that shine against the fibrous, muscular optic background like synaptic connections. With the image of the eye comes the suggestion of the brain and with it the possibility of judgment. Is the brain behind the eye contemplating the starless regions, those areas of the map illuminated by electricity, in which the aesthetics of the night sky have been transformed by the amber glow of urban sprawl?

Where the Worlds Meet the Mind (TC280) L, 2012 (page 129) explicitly takes the retina as a limit point, as the membrane between human consciousness and the visible world. In the new concrete work *Window*, 2014 (pages 42–43) this notion is elaborated: a hemispheric iris is set above a concrete security barrier, the convex side showing striated eye muscle and a world map in relief, the concave a smooth curving surface. *Window* holds the border between the outer world and inner

consciousness as a barrier as well as a site of reception – a littoral zone of judgment between observed and observer, object and thought, phenomenon and interpretation.

Returning at last to that other limit space – the seafront – we come back to *The Architecture of Life*, 2013 (pages 56–59), a work that also represents a temporal crossing point. The beauty of the shell, a geometrically complex structure created by a visionless invertebrate, represents a pre-art; an aesthetic from before artifice, yet into which (as with the orchid of *Stealth Desire (Etymology)*, 2013 (pages 50–53) generations of human culture have projected their own symbolism, be that sexual, spiritual or value-related. As the artwork *The Architecture of Life*, the shell shape has been magnified and transformed by the most contemporary methodology, its spiralling, spiky form built up in laser-hardened layers of liquid resin by a 3D printer prior to casting. The artless is glorified through the ultimate expression of contemporary technology, its heroic scale suggesting that this that came before us may yet also outlast us. In its logical structure and ambivalence to great events of *homo sapiens*' history, the shell and its creator-creature become a counterbalance to the panic-inducing entropy described in other works; beyond the chaos, fire and violence of the human world, here there can be creation without destruction.

1. "Black people are now 30 times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994." Owen Jones, *The Independent*, 23 July 2012
2. "Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner's feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses, saying, 'Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight.'" Plato, *Republic*, book iv, 439e–440a. Hackett Publishing Company Inc., Indianapolis, 1992. Translation by G.M.A. Grube, 1974, revised C.D.C. Reeve.