

# MARC QUINN

## HISTORY PAINTING

1 May – 17 June 2015, BOX gallery, Berlin

**“What unites the works I am showing in Berlin is that they are all related to my interest in how images, particularly images of the mass media, develop a life of their own once they are being disseminated on a large scale.”**

**“I am an artist from a stable western country and I look at the events in Syria from the outside. In the group show next door, I can see the works of those people, who are actually living through this conflict. I think that the juxtaposition of these two exhibitions is very interesting and inspiring.”**

### Marc Quinn, March 2015

This exhibition marks the artist's first solo show in Berlin and brings together tapestries, sculpture and new paintings. Each body of work is concerned with conflict, its representation in the mass media and questions the way imagery has the power to both depict and shape conflict.

“Mirage” (2008) is a sculpture based on a photograph from a prisoner of Abu Ghraib, the notorious Baghdad prison. In the press this image existed only as a grainy snapshot, not an image of a real person, but a virtual mirage. By remaking the image as a life size bronze, the reality, and inhumanity are made real again – it becomes a fact, not a fiction. It has numerous other references, as the artist explains: It is like Lacoön struggling with snakes, a veiled Christ, a crucifixion, Guston's Ku Klu Klan figures, Goya, a Spanish Ecce Homo sculpture, a portrait, not a spectre. Other than being an image of a real person, it has numerous other references, as the artist explains: “It looks like a veiled Christ, an image of forgiveness as well as subliminal crucifixion.” It references depictions of injustice and suffering which one finds throughout the history of art. Moreover, “one of the amazing things was that the image [of the veiled prisoner, with arms stretched out in a Christ-like manner] immediately became somewhat an iconic image.”

Historic events quite obviously influence what is being reported in the news. But the big question of our age is: How do the images of the news media affect the course of events? What happens when images of anarchy and revolution, that we are constantly bombarded with, have colonized our minds? When they influence the way we think about places we have never been to, or about people we have never met?

For centuries the genre of history painting was regarded as the highest and noblest form of art. Typically, the scenes depicted celebrate the virtues, the power and the rule of the patron who commissioned them. History paintings were hung on the walls of castles, so as to reinforce the status of the person in power. Quinn's tapestries invert this logic, in more than one way: First, the riots depicted in “The Creation of History” series always draw upon uprisings, which developed from bottom-up, rather than that they were imposed upon a people by a ruler. Secondly, as opposed to traditional history paintings, the tapestries are not hung on a wall but lie on the floor. Consequently, one can easily roll them up and walk away with them. This nomadic element of the work reflects how rapidly images and knowledge can move around the world. And finally, these tapestries are made not only to be looked at, but to be walked on. And as one walks over them, the tapestries begin to erode, just as stories in the news eventually fade away into distant memory. “One thing that really strikes me”, Quinn says, “is that never mind how horrendous a news headline might be, eventually it will be forgotten. In other words: the tapestries are also about history as memory.”

The tapestries are produced in an area of Flanders where tapestries have been produced for centuries using a Jacquard loom. Marc Quinn says that what he likes “about the Jacquard loom is that the image is completely woven from thread.” In this way, it is a sculpture made of threads. Furthermore, the Jacquard loom, invented in 1805, was the first mechanical loom that was programmed by punch cards. The logic behind this invention is the same logic on which the first computers were based. “In a way the threads of the tapestries are like pixels of an image. They are a kind of pre-modern digital media.”

The ‘News Clouds’ are a new series of paintings of blue skies, based on photographs taken by the artist. Below the image – almost in a manner of a footnote – the artist quotes a news headline from the day the picture was taken. The horrific events cited are in stark contrast to the exquisiteness of sky, with its brightly glowing white and fluffy clouds. This series of paintings is inspired by Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (ca. 1555-68) and W.H. Auden's poem about that painting, entitled *Musée des Beaux Arts*. Just as Brueghel dismisses Icarus' fall into the sea as almost irrelevant, or as Auden interprets the scene as an example

of “how everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster”, Marc Quinn’s exhibition HISTORY PAINTING remind us how the whole world continues despite all the horrendous things taking place at the same time. And they suggest that, at the end of the day, even the cruellest of events eventually become footnotes in history.

### **Biography**

Marc Quinn is one of the leading artists of his generation. His sculptures, paintings and drawings explore the relationship between art and science, the human body and the perception of beauty, among other things. Quinn came to prominence in 1991 with his sculpture *Self* (1991); a cast of the artist’s head made from eight pints of his own frozen blood. Other critically acclaimed works include *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), a fifteen-ton marble statue of the heavily pregnant and disabled Alison Lapper, exhibited on the fourth plinth at London’s Trafalgar Square; *Siren* (2008) a solid gold sculpture of the model Kate Moss displayed at The British Museum, London; *All of Nature Flows Through Us* (2011), a six meter bronze iris installed at Kistefos-Museet Norway; *Breath* (2012), a colossal replica of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* commissioned for the 2012 Paralympics opening ceremony and *Planet* (2013), a monumental rendition of the artist’s son as a sleeping baby, permanently installed at The Gardens by The Bay Singapore. He has exhibited in many important exhibitions internationally including Give and Take, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2001), the 50th Venice Biennale (2003) and the Gwangju Biennale (2004). Museum and gallery shows include Tate Gallery, London (1995), Kunstverein Hannover (1999), Fondazione Prada, Milan (2000), Tate Liverpool (2002), MACRO, Rome (2006), Fondation Beyeler, Basel (2009), The White Cube, London (2010), Musée Océanographique, Monaco (2012), Fondazione Giorgio Cini (2013) and Arter, Space for Art, Istanbul (2014). A major exhibition by the artist will take place at White Cube London this summer. Throughout his oeuvre, Quinn draws on ideas and themes relating to the human body. Other key subjects include cycles of growth and evolution through topical issues such as genetics and the manipulation of DNA, as well as issues of life and death and identity. Quinn’s work uses a broad range of materials, both traditional and untraditional. The materiality of the object, in both its elemental composition and surface appearance, is at the heart of Quinn’s work.

### **Musee des Beaux Arts**

#### **W. H. Auden**

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;  
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.  
<http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html>