

# THE EYE OF HISTORY: MARC QUINN'S NEW COSMOLOGY

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It is nearly fifty years since the French philosopher Michel Foucault famously ended *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* by claiming that “man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end”. He predicted that the modern attack on how Enlightenment thought enabled mankind to define itself through the study of the natural world and the human sciences would lead to a new order of things, in which “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”.<sup>1</sup> The apocalyptic disappearance of Foucault’s idea of man takes place in the shifting sands of the littoral zone, an ambiguous space where the sea comes closest to the shore. But ‘littoral’ also describes an organism that grows, lives, or has been deposited within this zone. For Foucault, mankind disappears from where, according to Darwin’s evolutionary theories, he first came, rising out of the sea onto the shore, only to vanish once more, “without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things”.<sup>2</sup> The littoral zone is where life on earth begins and ends; it is the location of origins, where chaos solidifies into form, where travel starts and concludes, a point of departure and a place of arrival; it is a space of fusion and of separation, where we try – and often fail – to distinguish nature from culture. It is where we define who we are as humans, or, in Foucault’s case, confront the terror (and potential excitement) of our insignificance. And as a direct consequence, this is a space where creativity is at its most extreme and profound.

It is in the shifting sands of the littoral zone that Marc Quinn has been making art for over two decades. In works involving his body and those of others, as well as an extraordinarily diverse array of media (sculpture, photography, painting, weaving) and materials (blood, bread, faeces, rubber, silicone, silver, wool, DNA), Quinn has simultaneously shocked and seduced us into asking questions about who we are as late modern people. For him, the artistic object, its practice and its statement, is always a paradox: in a world of artifice where we are bombarded with images of the perfect body, does our flesh imprison us, or can it liberate us? Is nature a meaningful term any more, or is it always already mediated through the lens of science and culture? The shock of Quinn lies in his innovative use of materials, for instance when a sample of his blood or DNA becomes the most realistic manifestation of contemporary self-portraiture. His seduction resides in the universal iconography of his subject matter, as when the disabled bodies of his ‘Complete Marbles’ (1999–2000) ask us to look again at fragments of Greek statuary, and the ‘Evolution’ series (2005) inverts the sculptural process of Michelangelo’s unfinished ‘Slaves’ (1519–23), or when his flower paintings and tapestries like *Pixelation of a Hybrid*, 2011 both speak to and transform our established understanding of seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting and the decorative *verdure* tradition of Flemish and Ottoman weaving.

Beyond shock and seduction comes the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, and *The Littoral Zone* comes as close as Quinn has been to creating a perfect marriage between artwork and exhibition space. The Oceanographic Museum in Monaco is itself a littoral zone, a towering architectural monument to culture perched eighty metres above the Mediterranean Sea. The museum was built by Albert I, Prince of Monaco, an enthusiastic student of the new sciences of oceanography and palaeontology, who founded institutes in both disciplines and in 1910 inaugurated the Oceanographic Museum for ongoing research into the study of oceanic life. The basement aquarium contains over 6,000 specimens belonging to 400 fish and 200 invertebrate species, while the museum above contains thousands of artefacts related to the sea, from skeletons, tools and model ships to statues of Albert as a pioneering oceanographer. For Quinn, the museum represents a marine *Wunderkammer*, a littoral space that ascends

vertically from nature to culture. Beginning with its aquarium encasing specimens from the sea just metres away, it rises upwards in geological layers towards the upper floor of man-made artifice and culture, exemplified in the stuffed fish and sculptural mimicking of the sea below in a scientific cosmography of nineteenth-century humanity's triumphant control over the natural elements.

Museums are a culmination of the obsession with taxonomic classification whereby humanity's study of the natural sciences aims to impose order on the world. But Quinn's exhibition shows how the museum has always been a littoral zone. From its origins in the Greek *Mouseion* as a shrine dedicated to man's communion with the nine Muses, to the Renaissance fascination with how the *Kunstammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, can distinguish *naturalia* (the classical definition of the natural world), from *artificialia* (man-made, fabricated objects), the museum is a place where we come to understand the origins of our life on earth. For Quinn, it also represents the history of our common future. *The Littoral Zone* asks where we have come and where we are going as humans, and how we might record this journey for future generations within the evolving space of a museum.

The enduring juxtaposition of nature and culture emerge in the exhibition's first two pieces. Outside the museum stands *Planet* (see pages 6–9), a nine-metre sculpture of a seven-month-old baby which seems to float magically in the air. Is it, as the title suggests, a world unto itself drifting through deep space, or is it a tiny foetus turning in the womb? Quinn asks us to contemplate the passage of time through space: the foetus seems frozen in time, and yet it is hurtling through a frantic nine-month cycle from conception to birth. Similarly, our fragile blue planet when seen from space seems to be captured in an eternal cosmic present, when it is of course orbiting the sun at over 100,000 kilometres per hour. This is the macrocosm in microcosm, a universe viewed through man-made time, but represented here in all its beautiful fragility. Just as we marvel at the act of human creation and sustainability in the womb, so we wonder at how the baby supports itself as a sculptural construct: both are miraculous and equally susceptible to imminent catastrophe. Are we about to step into the natural world of the museum or an artificial world mediated by the evolving and self-absorbed humanity that stands guard outside?

*Planet* is dramatically contrasted as soon as the visitor steps into the exhibition with a remarkable new departure in Quinn's work, *The Origin of the World (Cassis madagascariensis)*, *Indian Ocean 310* (see pages 35–9). This piece, based on a large sea snail found in the Atlantic (and not Madagascar as its name suggests – a knowing glance by Quinn at the uses and abuses of nineteenth-century scientific taxonomy) has, like the baby, been scaled up to a monumental three metres in height. Having been introduced to the origins of human evolution outside the exhibition, here we see an apparently natural object from the very beginning of life on earth. "There are to be found in the sea such strange and diverse kinds of shells," wrote the sixteenth-century French anatomist Ambroise Paré, "that one can say that Nature, chambermaid of great God, plays in fabricating them."<sup>3</sup> But the sheer scale of Quinn's piece announces the fact that this is not natural fabrication but *artificialia* – a work of human craft.

The specimen has been deliberately chosen, because the shells of *Cassis madagascariensis* are used in the creation of another intricate example of human artifice: cameo jewellery. But in Quinn's fabrication this shell becomes a piece of *artificialia* untouched by human hands. First, it has been digitally scanned where its elements are broken down into code – transforming it into a body of data rather like DNA. It is then transformed into a three-dimensional object. Lasers reproducing the shell's encoded data criss-cross a vat of liquid; where the lasers meet, the liquid solidifies. The shell slowly emerges out of a primal liquid – or sea – a littoral form emerging from chaos, rather like Botticelli's *Venus*, or the world itself, as the continents separate from the sea and it evolves into the planet we now inhabit.

It is only through the technical mediation of digital scanning that the intense realism of the shell can be achieved, bringing back to life something from the very beginning of time through the most contemporary uses of technology. The resulting object represents an archaeology of sculpture. Just as the 'original' sculptural shell emerges as a form because of the ceaseless activity of a tiny, brainless invertebrate unaware it was making art, so the digital process controlled by Quinn is completely free from human intervention. Scaled up, it becomes a hyper-natural object from the beginning of time that it also resolutely artificial, existing in our present moment, a monument to the marriage of natural and technological evolution.

We are then confronted with yet another manifestation of evolution: Quinn's nine monumental sculptures showing the human foetus as it develops from a formless mass to its

imminent birth, surrounding a tenth piece, *Evolution 0 (260 million years ago)* (see pages 40–1 & 44). The connection here with *Planet* and *The Origin of the World* is compelling. Recent palaeontological discoveries date the appearance of noticeably mammal-like features in fossilised remains to around 260 million years ago. So for Quinn, the foetus's ontogeny (how a species develops from fertilisation through to birth) reflects humanity's phylogeny (how we evolve across time).<sup>4</sup> The point is made in a playful yet deeply moving image of another scene from the littoral zone: a young boy standing on a beach in the Galapagos Islands (the cradle of Darwin's evolutionary theory), looking at a marine iguana. Here the boy, not much older than the final sculptural foetus standing in the same room, gazes at a littoral reptile from the beginning of time. Nearly three hundred million years of life on earth are captured in their mutually uncomprehending gaze.

Another gaze appears to dominate the room: a photograph of Quinn's retina. But this is not the artist's visual gaze at all; it is the light-sensitive tissue on the inner surface of the artist's eye. This is yet another primal moment in the drama of creation, this time within the human central nervous system, from which the retina emerges (and is the only part of the CNS capable of being photographed non-invasively). It is where light meets the chemistry of the body and is transformed into images and thoughts. Rather than reproducing his own gaze, Quinn transforms himself into an atavistic Cyclops, showing us the primitive interior zone of transformation that takes place between our inner and outer worlds, from where all creative acts originate. The retina's photoreceptor cells process what we see initially as black-and-white vision and colour perception. Quinn's two flower paintings, *Separation of Body and Soul* (see pages 58–61), imitate this process. The flowers are in black and white, apparently drained of pigment; but their constituent colours are then mixed and spattered across the surface. The image of the flower is separated from its defining principle (colour), and then, in a sensational move that offers a new perspective on the formal dead-end of Jackson Pollock's action paintings, Quinn asks how human perception can put an image back together. Where the formless marble block of *Evolution 0* shows how life emerges from matter over millennia, the 'Iris' and *Separation of Body and Soul* paintings question how matter becomes an image in the blink of the artist's eye.

Having explored the evolution of science and man across vast tracts of time and space, Quinn then takes us into the labyrinth of the world we have created. A series of white, thumb-shaped labyrinth paintings are contrasted with their luridly coloured opposites. If we immediately think of the Cretan Minotaur (an evolutionary throwback) or the modernist self-alienation of Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths*, we see these images as asking perennial questions about the modern self: what defines us as individuals, and how do we understand our individuality in relation to the world 'out there'? But Quinn immediately wrong-foots us. In a biometric surveillance age of retinal scans and fingerprint technology, these images represent an abstract mapping of the self: the technology identifies the thumbprint as unique to one person, but tells us absolutely nothing about them – until we slice through the blank whiteness to reveal the colourful, messy world of flesh and blood beneath. Or then again, are we looking at another form of surveillance, a heat-sensitive mapping of an anonymous human digit?

"The universe to the eye of the human understanding is framed like a labyrinth, presenting as it does so many ambiguities of way, such deceitful resemblances of objects and signs, natures too irregular in their lines and so knotted and entangled," wrote Francis Bacon in 1620, on the eve of the Scientific Revolution.<sup>5</sup> From the planet, through the earth emerging from a shell, to the retina and the labyrinth, Marc Quinn's journey has inevitably led him to mapping. The extraordinary new series *The Eye of History* (see pages 86–95) brings us face to face with the world seen through (or from) the lens of the human eye. Here is the paranoia of our global age, of the self trying to keep up with an endlessly shrinking and evolving world of information: blink and you miss it, or, as the deliberately disorienting projections and perspectives of each globe assumes, the world has moved on. It was only in 1972 with the photograph taken onboard NASA's Apollo 17 spacecraft (see page 23) that the world finally saw the whole face of the earth. Before then, cosmographers had always had to imagine what the earth looked like from the perspective of God above. In his *Geography* (150 AD), Ptolemy argued that the goal of geography is a view of the world "analogous to making a portrait of the whole head" using the eye's "visual rays".<sup>6</sup> In 1570 Abraham Ortelius published his *Theatrum orbis terrarum* – the 'Theatre of the World', drawing on a standard Renaissance cosmographical conceit that geography is "the eye of history", where "the map being laid before our eyes, we may behold things done or places where they were done, as if they were at this time present". The map acts like a

mirror, or glass, because “the charts being placed, as it were certain glasses before our eyes, will the longer be kept in memory, and make the deeper impression in us”.<sup>7</sup> Quinn asks if this is the ‘eye’ or the ‘I’ of history, where all of life on earth is mediated through the lens of human subjectivity.

But as the modernity of the world faces the prehistory of another shell, Quinn illuminates both objects as inhabiting a common prehistory. The logarithmic spiral traced on the surface of the shell is a naturally recurring version of a loxodrome, an oblique line of bearing drawn by navigators across the surface of the globe. Any loxodrome will circle the globe spiralling towards infinity at either pole.<sup>8</sup> Like the archaic forming and separation of the land masses and stray islands that on Quinn’s globes appear as so many spatters of paint, the earth, he reminds us, just like the shell, pursues its own temporal logic, spiralling through time and space, indifferent to the depredations of humanity, indifferent to the scenes of teeming creativity, disaster, extreme bodily transformations and Last Judgments that stalk the exhibition’s upper room.

In another revelatory juxtaposition of nature and artifice, the *Supa Littoral Zone* shell stands next to *Stealth Kate* (see pages 70-1), a sculpture of the iconic model Kate Moss. Like the children emerging from a watery, primeval world (or rising up to heaven) in the two *The Zone* paintings hanging next to her, or Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, Moss appears to unfold from out of her shell, an idealised version of twenty-first-century femininity, a modern-day Venus morphing in front of our eyes. Emerging from the digital mediation of Quinn’s artistry, she is just as much a time-locked image of beauty as Botticelli’s painting, itself a product of the artifice of fifteenth-century Florentine Medici patronage. Hardly any of us ever see an unmediated Kate Moss: her image is always represented through visual media. As if to emphasise the point, Quinn has reproduced his iconic blood head, *Self* (see page 81), as another variation on his theme of evolution and artifice, another example of artistic mediation giving the artist the illusion of seeing his own personal evolution across a human life cycle. However, it takes on a deeper resonance than ever when set against a room full of images of the human body defined – and consumed – by extreme states of transformation.

Next we emerge onto the roof and the poignant artifice of flowers in a garden. Perhaps we have found Eden, but if we have, it is that most contrived of spaces, a Zen garden, forming the outline of a tree’s branches in another example of humanity’s artifice in seeking to understand nature. If this is not paradise, it is nonetheless a creative point of departure for future artificial acts of evolution.

In Quinn’s final images of a digitally routed sculpture of a nuclear explosion emerging from a cloud of data, and the statues of tattooed bodies juxtaposed with skeletons consumed by (or feeding off) fire, there is an apocalyptic sense of recursive time. Perhaps the current fascination with extreme bodily transformation is a sign of our self-absorbed decadence, but it is more likely to be just another step in our evolutionary cycle. *In the Amazon the Women of a Tribe Which Hunts Monkeys for Food Breastfeed the Resultant Monkey Orphans* (see page 82) displays a shrink-wrapped ball of ice from the North Pole in a refrigerated case, its frozen form maintained by a refrigeration unit. The work captures the essence of Quinn’s exhibition. Here is a piece of nature – a fragment of the ever-receding northern ice-cap – maintained in an act of cultural artifice – a refrigeration unit – that is contributing to the destruction of the earth’s environment. The cultural paradox presented by Quinn appears to be inherent in our nature: throughout life on earth we are capable of simultaneously destroying what we love, and creating what we fear.

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1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, 1970), p. 422. Foucault’s book was first published in French in 1966 as *Les Mots et les choses*.

2. Joseph Conrad, *Nostramo* (London, 1990), p. 416. First published in 1904.

3. Ambroise Paré, *Des monsters et prodiges* (Geneva, 1971), p. 117. First published in 1573.

4. Jerry Brotton, ‘From flower to foetus: the evolution of Marc Quinn’, in Marc Quinn, *Evolution* exhibition catalogue (White Cube, London, 2008), pp. 3-7.

5. Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration and New Atlantis* (Illinois, 1980), p. 14

6. Quoted in J. Lennart Berggren and Alexander Jones (eds.), *Ptolemy’s Geography: An Annotated Translation of the Theoretical Chapters* (Princeton, 2000), p. 57.

7. ‘To the courteous reader’, in Abraham Ortelius, *Theatre of the Whole World* (London, 1606), unpaginated. First published in Antwerp, 1570.

8. See Jerry Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps* (London, 2012).