

The Journey not the Destination

Marc Quinn and Joachim Pissarro in conversation

JP: I wanted to ask you about this fascinating quote of yours regarding your latest series of portraits, ‘Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas’: ‘The new subjects are people who have decided in some way or another to take charge of their bodies and transform the outside to the will of the inside by surgery, and making their fantasy a reality. It is the first time in history that we have been able to transform ourselves to that extent.’ I could not agree more.

MQ: Because we’re so used to plastic surgery being sensationalised, we forget the commitment people make to it. It’s some kind of strange, warped, spiritual journey. Perhaps you can even argue that today, in Western society, it’s the *only* spiritual journey one can undertake that lies outside of organised religion. It’s a journey of transformation, one in which you take yourself out of the everyday into the realm of myth. These people make their dreams real; it’s a reality show in the purest etymological sense.

JP: And this fits your definition of the term ‘artist’?

MQ: They are artists in the sense that artists transform the outside world to reflect their own inner world. I would do this on a piece of marble or clay, on a canvas or using a computer, but these people apply it directly to themselves. *Self* (1991) was the closest I got to that, but I never wanted to permanently change my own body because, to me, being an artist is about changing all the time. These people are almost what you might call outsider artists except they use their bodies instead of traditional artists’ materials.

JP: You’ve also explored the work of tattoo artists, who likewise use the body as a medium.

MQ: Yes, I think that tattoos are really interesting because they belong to the pre-surgery era. Tattooing is a way of marking nature with culture; it’s a way of taking control of it, in the same way that ploughing a field or doing earthworks is taking control of nature. When tattoos were first applied they were informed by their cultural and religious context. Now, though, that context has been lost; now people invent their own contexts and things can go a bit crazy. It’s like a thousand languages and a thousand religions all in the

same place, with everyone starting from scratch instead of building on established traditions. Being tattooed is also about anchoring yourself in your body. When I think about the classic, non-tribal tattoo – the anchor on the sailor’s arm – I think it’s no accident that particular design rose to prominence. The sailor on his boat is trying to ‘ground’ himself using the tattoo, fixing himself within his body. Nowadays, people live such a virtual existence that it would almost be possible to live a life in which the body is hardly used. This makes our relationship to our bodies even more problematic – and more interesting. This is the area these latest portraits are exploring. The notable thing about Pamela Anderson – and what makes her unique in the context of this group – is that she is the only person using surgery within the parameters of cultural or tribal norms. Her transformation is well within the limits sanctioned by mainstream media culture. Anderson is like a tattooed Polynesian or a Makonde woman with a lip disc: completely acceptable. She shows us that equivalents to these rituals are still happening today within the context of our own 21st-century tribes.

JP: You place significant emphasis on the spiritual journey, sometimes even the quasi-religious concerns, which animate your models – and presumably also animate you to a degree?

MQ: Yes. I think that what I mean by being ‘religious’ is the attempt to make sense of life: the attempt to make sense of what it means to be a person in a body, to make sense of one’s relationship to the world. I think that religion was invented to provide answers to these fundamental questions, so that people could get on with their lives and not have to think about them too much. If people are without a particular religion, then they start to invent their own answers.

JP: So, are you suggesting that many of your subjects have taken it upon themselves to create a sort of toolkit of their own spiritual answers, which they have internalised.

MQ: Well, in fact they’ve externalised them, because they’ve transformed their bodies. The journey might be to turn yourself from a man into a woman, or it might be to try to

stop the visible effects of time. Obviously, there are lots of cultural pressures, and I'm not denying that many of those who have gone down this route may have done so as a result of psychological stress. These are stresses that everyone lives with, but the manifestations of how these people deal with them are far more extreme.

JP: I'm convinced by what you're saying, but to a more conservative audience what you are suggesting would probably at the very least seem paradoxical, if not downright shocking, because the people who traditionally look at and think about religious and spiritual values do not tend to associate this with transgender or transsexual practices.

MQ: Well, one has to remember that everything in human culture is a construct invented to satisfy the needs of a given moment in history and that just because it's been around for a long time doesn't make it any truer. At one point, Christian values were shocking to the pagans of Rome. I'm not saying that this approach to cosmetic surgery is a new religion, but I'm saying it's the same quest for the answers to the big questions addressed by great works of literature and art.

These people are working intuitively from within the cultural context they are part of, trying to deal with their physical transformation in much the same way as an adolescent might struggle with the transformation from child to adult. The other day, I was looking at the embryo sculptures that I made in 2008 and thinking, 'We all started off like that.' And the transformation from embryo to fully grown adult is much more extreme than anything that any of the models in this show have undergone. Throughout the course of our lives, humans transform to such an extraordinary degree that we almost pretend it doesn't happen, because if we actually stop and think about it, it's just too weird. So, having a breast implant operation is nothing compared to growing from an embryo into an adult. Every embryo starts off as female, but if it gets a massive hit of testosterone in the womb it becomes male. When we look at Buck Angel, we see that being played out in a small way on an adult body. But every man in the world has been on Buck's journey – in a much more extreme way.

JP: So, what you call 'the journey' is, in fact, a life journey.

MQ: It's the journey of the spirit in a body, I suppose, from birth to death; it also finds itself reflected in all the many little journeys in life.

JP: Staying with that great quote of yours, that these people are 'artists who use their own bodies as their mediums' – which we could almost use as an epigraph for this show – I'd like to bring up an example of a 19th-century artist who used bodies as his medium in absolutely every single work – all of his sculptures, drawings and paintings depicting dancers: Degas.

MQ: Yes, you're right.

JP: His model dancers were nobodies: they were the outcasts of society, considered the next best thing to whores. Well-to-do gentlemen would be waiting after the rehearsals to pick up young, new flesh – those are Degas' dancers. Socially speaking, we are talking about women that were truly 'low-life'. There is a certain element of that within your choice of subjects, as well, isn't there?

MQ: Well, obviously, some of the people I portray inhabit that world in order to make a living: Buck is a producer of pornographic films and, in fact, the sculpture of Buck and Allanah Starr having sex is a re-creation of a scene from one of their films. So you do have a sense of their outsider status. Yet, in the sculpture where they're standing holding hands, they're like a New Age Adam and Eve.

JP: So, between the porn stars and Adam and Eve is another subliminal journey.

MQ: It's the oldest journey in the world; it's the journey from the Garden of Eden to the incarnation. When desire enters the world, you are banished from the Garden: it's all about the 'before' and 'after'. These are classic themes that have been depicted many times over the centuries.

JP: Yes, such as in Masaccio's frescos of *The Expulsion from Paradise*, in which Adam and Eve are leaving the Garden of Eden. That's a wonderful example of before and after 'the fall'.

MQ: In a way, 'the fall' is a mythological invention to explain birth. The time before 'the fall' is the gestation in the womb, while being born is 'the fall' itself. What's interesting

with Buck and Allana is that, because they also make pornographic films, you have this combination of the sacred and the profane, which has always been around: think of the temple prostitutes and the vestal virgins. Religion and sex are very much inter-related, even though we might not care to think so, and that's why I like the sculpture of Buck and Allana fucking. To me it's like a Bernini: it has this sense that the moment of orgasm is the moment when you somehow free yourself from your bodily existence. That is what's so great about Bernini: he makes sculptures that are so ambiguous.

JP: You mean *Ecstasy of St Theresa*?

MQ: Yes, is she experiencing sexual ecstasy or religious ecstasy? Is there any difference between the two? It's all about transcendence – about momentarily leaving our bodies.

JP: Yes, exactly. Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst, used the work as the cover image for one of his *Seminar* books.¹

MQ: Well, I think psychoanalysis is another way of trying to deal with the same issues. For my subjects, you could say their transformation is a form of auto-analysis.

JP: I know you must be aware that your work is not exactly easy. Whether it's this present group of portraits, 'The Complete Marbles' series (1999–2001) or your self-portraits *Self* (1991–ongoing), your works are all pungent and loaded. The initial impression they give is very much one of being 'in-your-face'.

MQ: I'm always interested in challenging myself, and I'm not interested in things that don't make me think or feel. In creating the work, I go through the same journey that every viewer goes through, questioning what it's all about. I like to make art that makes you feel and makes you think. Obviously, I also like to make things that are beautiful. It's very interesting when you combine the two because beauty then becomes a sugared pill. Whether it's beauty of technique, execution or material, something a little more challenging slips in before you've realised it.

JP: I'm glad you brought up the notion of combining extreme, polarized emotions. I'm thinking now about

Rauschenberg, among other people, who created alluring and repelling works and displayed them simultaneously. For instance, when Rauschenberg was working on his gorgeous seductive gold-leaf collages, at the same time he was composing what he called 'Dirtscapes', literally a clump of mud, or dirt, laid out inside a frame. But you take this approach to another level – a human level – and that's even starker and tougher.

MQ: My feeling is that art should reflect the world we live in and the world isn't one thing: one minute it can be beautiful, one minute it can be terrible; one moment you can be happy and one moment you can be sad. I think that art is a mirror of life and so it should reflect all the nuances and facets, all the paradoxes.

JP: For those who are unfamiliar with your work, the question will be: 'What is this artist telling us; is he glorifying these people's transformations? What ethical stance is he taking?'

MQ: I'm just presenting reality – well, re-presenting reality. I'm not taking a moral view on it but on the other hand, of course, there's a celebration of humanity. I think what I'm looking for is humanity in areas in which people might immediately write off its presence; when, in fact, there is something there, a spiritual or a human interest.

JP: Your latest works strongly resonate, in my opinion, with the recent revival of Humanism in philosophy. The theorist Johann Gottlieb Fichte, probably one of Kant's best students, writes: "The highest drive in human beings is [...] the drive toward identity, toward complete oneness with one's Self, and, in order to be identical with one's Self, toward the unity of everything outside of the Self with one's own necessary concepts of it [...] All concepts that lie in my Self should have an expression in the Not Self, a corresponding image. This is the nature of the human drive."² Fichte defined mankind as 'nothing', by which he meant that mankind has the capacity to be nothing and to adopt all kinds of attributes to change himself in any number of ways. As he put it: 'Individuality is a reciprocal concept.' It's also about the notion

that one receives one's own identity through another person's gaze.

MQ: Yes, exactly. These people are all about themselves, but they're also about communicating with the world, because their difference is only different in relation to other people's normality. So, they are very much operating within the social sphere, using the language of what is normal and abnormal in their work. After all, if they lived on their own on a desert island and had the ability to transform themselves in this way, would they make all these changes? I don't know, but I think they're reacting to the pressures of their social situation. What's also interesting is the way that they are re-making archetypes. If you go back to Ovid, to Greek mythology, you find this fascination with the transformation of one thing into another. Then you look at my sculpture of Chelsea Charms with her huge breast implants, and you could say she's like an extreme version of Aphrodite.

JP: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* does offer a marvellous example of what you are describing. Do you know *The Venus of Willendorf*?

MQ: It's a fantastic sculpture.

JP: Yes, this tiny piece of carved limestone with huge breasts. It reminds me of your sculpture of Chelsea Charms.

MQ: You also get that paradox where opposites meet, so you get the sense of her with her extreme femininity, her huge breasts, yet her profile could almost be that of male genitalia; the breasts are like two huge testicles. The same happens with Brancusi's sculpture *Princess X*: it becomes a phallic symbol, something that desires as well as being an object of desire. On the Greek island of Delos, I saw these sculptures of erect penises with testicles. The tops had broken off them, but they looked uncannily like the torso of Chelsea Charms.

JP: If one defines humanity as extreme elasticity or, to use a more art-related term, *plasticity*, then to be human is to be able to transform oneself. As you point out, one is transforming oneself anyway through the forces of life.

MQ: Well, in a way, all plastic surgery is a reaction to that. It's saying, 'I will *not* be transformed, I will be the transformer!' That's a very, very important motivation

and maybe that's what it's all about – making yourself the subject and not the object.

JP: I want to discuss further your definition of humanity with regard to your interest in Buddha, which is beautifully represented through your collection of Gandharan sculptures. In particular, I am thinking of that incredible example of the emaciated, starving vision of Buddha in your collection.

MQ: It's a paradoxical image. You have what appears to be someone on the verge of death, a cadaver even, when in fact it is the Buddha who has starved himself in an attempt, through austerity, to find enlightenment. It's a depiction of the moment he realises this is the wrong path and that he must now return to the middle ground. So, although it's an image that looks like death, it is in fact the image of the birth of the Buddhist religion.

JP: Buddha, who appears frequently in your work, incarnates extremes: he had been living a princely life, sheltered from the real world, and then he became aware of himself and reality. This awareness marks the beginning of every journey of self-transformation. That is why we see images of Buddha ranging from complete emaciation to the fat Buddha with a big belly.

MQ: What I like about Gandhara is that it's in-between; it's not Indian and it's not Greco-Roman, it's a hybrid of the first globalised world. And that's why, to me, it has resonance now, when we're living in this second globalised world in which everything is mixing up. It's also like the subjects of my latest portraits, who, apart from Jackson, are still in the process of transformation, as they will probably change their appearance again.

JP: Thomas Beatie is somebody who has undergone operations and is having hormone replacement therapy. When you made the portrait of him while pregnant, he was in the process of leaving one body, but stopped halfway through. He is almost like Buddha just before death. Thomas returns to his fertile female body shape, but in all appearances other than his belly he looks like a man. So he's neither identity, he's both.

MQ: Exactly. And yet Thomas would hate to think he looked

feminine, even though of course he is pregnant. When I originally showed him the sculpture I'd made, he was very careful to make sure that the breasts weren't too big and that it looked exactly like his body. He didn't want to be re-feminised in the sculpture.

JP: That is interesting, because I was actually going to ask you how someone like Beatie felt about this journey, which some transsexuals would consider a failure.

MQ: I believe it's about being something beyond categorisation. And I think that's what a lot of these people would say. Although it might seem like they're trying to be men or women, in fact they're not: they're just trying to be what they are, which is something in-between two worlds. What Gandharan art expresses culturally, they are experiencing in a personal way.

JP: Somebody had told me about your work, before you and I ever met, and they said: 'Marc Quinn is embarking on a series of sculptures of transsexuals.' It seems inevitable that this will end up being one of the labels given to the show but, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

MQ: I don't think labels matter. In a way, my whole point is that reality is beyond labels. Hopefully, it's more subtle, complex and varied than that.

JP: I notice that you use the terms 'he' and 'his' in relation to Beatie. I was talking with my colleague Mara [Hoberman] about the suitable vocabulary for someone like Beatie, so we started playing with language and genders and we came up with some hybrid forms: 'hir penis' or 'hes vagina', for example.

MQ: Well, in a way, language is a form of philosophy, isn't it? My subjects could be seen as concrete philosophers.

JP: Instead of just talking about theoretical language games, your models are living out these indefinable situations.

MQ: In a way, art is philosophy through the creation of objects, through reality.

JP: And objects that are actually living beings – human figures.

MQ: Be it abstract or figurative, to me all good art is

essentially concrete philosophy. That's why the visual arts are so important right now: art compresses time and it talks about the world in a different way. It asks questions about where we are and who we are.

JP: Although you are using marble and bronze, there is nothing static in your work.

MQ: There's a tension created by using traditional materials to deal with things that are about flux and transformation.

JP: Exactly. It's the flux, the in-betweenness, which I find extremely interesting. In some of your portraits, you are representing situations that challenge the capacity of language to name the genders of the models who are inbetween masculine and feminine – and who, in fact, can be both.

MQ: I'm fascinated by the need we have to classify. Why do we care so much whether something fits into a system that we've invented in order to describe the world? When it doesn't, it causes a kind of short circuit, which makes you reconsider the whole notion of systems – which I think is a healthy thing.

JP: I'm trying to write about your work, but it is escaping and evading language by making categorisation virtually impossible.

MQ: That must mean it's working [laughter].

JP: Humour is a very important aspect when you're dealing with extremely complex issues.

MQ: I think there has to be a sense of beauty to art – and a sense of humour as well.

JP: Are you familiar with that incredible sculpture of the hermaphrodite at the Louvre.

MQ: Absolutely. There's also one in Rome, at the Musei Capitolini..

JP: With the sculpture in the Louvre, if you start to look at it from the rear, you see this very feminine, curvaceous back with a tapered waist. But then, as you move around to the front ...

MQ: You get a surprise.

JP: Yes, exactly. It's very dramatic and disorienting.

MQ: There's nothing new in the world about humanity, is there? [chuckles] We just re-make it.

JP: We find a new way of saying the same thing that fits within the context of today, the concerns of which are different from whatever was experienced before.

MQ: Well, every age is different and that's why we can re-make classic themes. My sculpture of Pamela Anderson is a kind of auto-birth. It's like the birth of Venus and the splitting of the atom; it's someone creating themselves. In the sculpture, only one of them has a belly-button.

JP: Let's move on to discuss your new series of paintings, 'In the Night Garden' (2010). I was rather surprised by the images of the works you sent me.

MQ: They are like pictures in reverse – more abstract, more dreamlike than regular compositions. These works form the landscape backdrop to the portrait sculptures. They are floral still lifes, composed in the usual way, which I then photograph and paint, after inverting the image's colours in Photoshop. The result is a sort of looking-glass world in which the focus of the flowers seems to fall apart and different images start to suggest themselves, as in a hallucination. They are like a daydream, an alternative reality, a strangely evolved nature; they are drugs for people who don't take drugs these days.

JP: How did this process of reversing the colour scheme come about?

MQ: It's a reaction to the transformation that's been taking place over the past year or two in the wake of the financial crisis, this sense of the world somehow going inside out or turning upside down.

JP: You explained to me that you completely make these up the arrangements of flowers yourself.

MQ: Yes. I go to the flower market in Covent Garden in London and buy flowers and put them together into a still life composition, take a photograph and then paint from the photograph. All the plants that you can buy in Covent Garden couldn't possibly be growing in the same place at the same time naturally: it's completely counter-seasonal. So, to me, the flower market is emblematic of the way that human desire has changed our relationship to nature. We have a much more fragmented sense of what is natural and what is unnatural. In 17th-century Dutch flower paintings, as each

variety came into bloom, it would be added to the composition, so it would take the artist a whole season to paint a bouquet of flowers. In my paintings, you have the complete opposite: you have flowers that were immediately available and simultaneously in bloom in one place, in a cold, northern climate. In these reverse-colour images, everything that was black is white and everything that was white is black – although, of course, it's not an exact reversal; I always change the hues slightly while I'm making them. The effect is of a strange, futuristic dystopia. I went with my son to see the film *Avatar* the other day, and there is a night garden in the film that looks exactly like these paintings.

JP: In a way, your work for this show does bear a relationship to that film, doesn't it?

MQ: The film is about the humanity of the supposed outsider as opposed to that of the human. Like my sculptural works, it's about understanding the 'other'.

JP: How do you relate the paintings to the sculptures?

MQ: Well, they're also the product of a transformation, so they form an appropriate landscape for these figures to inhabit. The only difference is that this time I am the transformer.

1. Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge* (Norton, New York 1998)
2. Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, *The Purpose of Higher Education*, (Nightsun Books, Mount Savage, Maryland 1988), p. 30 (translation modified)