

The Threads of History

An interview with Marc Quinn by Tim Marlow

TM Marc, there are a number of big themes in your exhibition at ARTER but it seems to me that the overarching theme is history.

MQ Yes.

TM And history painting?

MQ Exactly.

TM The exhibition also features a new series called THE CREATION OF HISTORY.

MQ Yes. I think history painting is interesting because, traditionally, it's considered to be the 'highest' genre, even higher than portrait or landscape painting. It's evident if you look at the work of Rembrandt, for example. In 2011, during the London riots, it struck me that this was history being made. It made me think about how you create 'history' and how things are made from different threads. I thought about this first literally and then laterally, because I was looking at tapestries at the time, so I thought: why not make a tapestry and weave an image out of all these multiple threads? The other thing that's interesting about a tapestry is that it's basically an analogue version of a pixelated image, because the tapestry is created from lots of points in the same way that a digital image is. It's like a medieval digital image. It is this kind of thinking, of linking the past to current methods of imaging, and using an ancient technical medium, which connects the work to history in some way. When they are placed on the floor, they become like flying carpets and there's an element of fantasy. I like them equally as sculptures, or as carpets.

TM Will the viewer be able to walk on them?

MQ Yes.

TM I know it's a cliché, but there is some truth in the idea that we walk in the footsteps of history and as we make our footsteps we leave our trace. Is that what you're inviting the viewer to do?

MQ Exactly. With history, we erase certain bits and leave other bits in, so the work is really about collective memory, in a way. This idea physically manifests itself as you walk on the tapestry and you wear bits of it away. It's almost like some things are being lost, while other things are being highlighted. When you have a memory, society regurgitates it and alters it. No two persons' memory of one event is ever going to be the same, so it's this kind of collective memory which is what history paintings are really about, isn't it?

TM There are many metaphors for what history is but possibly the most potent one, I think, is the idea of history as a kind of seamless web.

MQ Yes, the idea of the web is interesting since all of these images were found on the internet—the other 'web' that we inhabit. This is another idea I'm really interested in: the way that we carry this whole world around with us in our brains because we have 24-hour news and a virtual world. We're in this web and the whole world is one great, big synaptic brain, in a sense.

TM Does the fact that we live in a 24-hour news culture, where history is always being met, in the sense of always being made, affect you?

MQ Yes.

TM But it seems to be almost trivialised by the endless screens of reporting that we have.

MQ It equalises it, doesn't it? In a funny way, it equalises, say, a news story on Kim Kardashian's pregnancy with a riot in Greece, so you wonder what's more important? It gets to the point where this equalisation by the media makes it difficult for us to want to differentiate, or for people to be able to differentiate, information.

TM So are you offering a critique of the former status of history painting? Are you saying that in our equalising world it is no longer possible or do you think that art still aspires to the values of those old-fashioned genres and that history painting, per se, is something that we should be re-examining?

MQ Yes, although I'm not historically analysing the birth of Kim Kardashian's baby or some other kind of pop-cultural moment. These are only images. I think it is about how, somehow, it can become creative without us really realising it.

TM I agree.

MQ It has something to do with that, but there is a second layer of history, or meaning of history in these things. For instance, the work entitled *THE CREATION OF HISTORY*, shown originally in Venice, is now framed on the wall. This was walked on for four months, so it has already been eroded by feet. These works become like an artefact in a way, almost like performance pieces that are eroded and worn down during the exhibition and then frozen in that condition after the exhibition has ended.

TM Do you think that destruction is a creative act?

MQ The viewers are not necessarily eroding one bit of the work intentionally.

TM Sure, now that's interesting.

MQ It's a trace of their paths, random or not.

TM Yes. Do you think that there's been a new strand in your work as you engage more directly with contemporary history? I am thinking about the Abu Ghraib pieces as well. Has your work become more violent?

MQ I think it reflects contemporary history. There's always been a violent type of thing in my work. For instance, *SELF* is violent in many ways and history has always been there. The Marie-Antoinette and Louis XVI sculptures I made in bread were really about the unknown quality of historical figures. These kind of blurred things that you keep trying to remember but which always disappear.

TM It's interesting that you said *SELF* is violent. I remember a conversation well where you said that *SELF* is literally violent since it's the removal of some life force within you, in some way.

MQ It's very violent. You are used to seeing blood when someone's been shot, or has fallen over, injured themselves, or been hit by a car or something like that, so when we see blood we unconsciously have those associations. But of course the paradox is that I wasn't harmed in the process. It's about the power of the human body. It's a paradoxical image because it is both an image of the insides being ripped out of the body in an act of destruction and yet also an image of the way that the body can miraculously recreate itself. So it's about creation as well as destruction.

TM Although it is arguably among the most intensely personal of all self-portraits in the history of art, because it's your own blood and it's a portrait of you made over a period of time, there is also, clearly, something universal about it. I'm curious where you locate yourself or where we, the viewer, locate ourselves in a number of your works, for example, in *SELF-PORTRAIT AFTER ZURBARÁN*. It nods back to historic Spanish art. In some works the eyes are yours and in some not. How much is it the exploration of the artist, and where do you lie in all of this?

MQ Well, I think the eyes refer again to the idea of a 24-hour media, paranoid vision; a post 9/11 vision where you see terrorism in everything. I was thinking about these themes and started doing the fingerprint paintings, which are about the way that this has happened. It reduces people—we're controlled by the fingerprint and the eye scan, so it's a representation of a paranoid, 'big brother' world. Then I happened to be looking at a globe and looking at an eye at the same time and they just sort of merged together in some obvious way because they were exactly the same shape. I thought of this amazing comment by an early philosopher that geography is the eye of history and so that became the *EYE OF HISTORY* series. This leads me to a new piece in this exhibition as well, in the *TOWARDS A NEW GEOGRAPHY* series. The first one is a work on paper. I've printed a world map in white on a black background and then by splashing black paint on it, I've created new forms within the continents. It reminds us that geography is actually a contingent thing that also evolves.

TM Yes, but our vision of the world is fluid. Although it's fluid over a period of millennia...

MQ Everything started as Pangaea, one continent became five continents and so on, which is something I am really interested in. The way that humans engage and affect the world; and how the world affects us and our relationship to nature, which has always been a theme that I've been interested in.

TM And time, different scales of time.

MQ Yes.

TM When you look at this map of the world you're looking at the largest conceivable thing; but through an appropriation or re-appropriation of a Pollock 'action' painting, which is one of my interpretations of that work, there's a split second that then immediately impacts on something and changes our vision.

MQ Yes, and when you do something, it has consequences beyond what you know. There is something about the black paint, it's a bit like oil or something, like the mineral resources that we've scoured out of the ground and the earth.

TM Does Darwin specifically play a role in your interest? Let's put it another way. It seems to me that since you came back from the Galápagos Islands after your trip there, I suddenly became aware that there was a very strong Darwinian element in your work. Now, for an artist who deals with where the world is, how we make sense of it and what our place in the world is, Darwin is inevitably going to play a role, so I would imagine that you've been interested in Darwin for a long time.

MQ Maybe it's become more conscious, as you said. I've always been interested in Darwin. How can you not be? It's one of the great, amazing paradoxes of the world: how we evolve, how the world evolves, from a single cell amoeba into a complex creature like a human being. Yet, we are still apes, even though we like to differentiate ourselves from the rest of the animal kingdom. We are and we aren't animals. In the flesh paintings, where I take a piece of lamb, cut into it, photograph it, then make a painting from the photograph, you get this kind of biopsy still life. I always think of drilling a little hole into a body, taking out a section of flesh, then enlarging it. In a way it's like SELF going back inside the body—although it's not the human body, it's an animal body.

TM But again, it's potently real, historically real, yet it's also an extraordinary form of abstraction too.

MQ Exactly. It's an abstract image made with the very material figuration, which is flesh, so it confounds the two things. It's beautiful but some people find it disgusting (I don't) but there is this kind of beautiful, disgusting dichotomy going on. There's a remark that someone made about De Kooning, when he first started, that he had taken a tiny corner of a Picasso and turned it into a whole painting. So the splashes and splodges, to me, bear the same kind of relationship to a Soutine or a Bacon or a Rembrandt. It's like taking a tiny bit of meat and then zooming in with a high intensity microscope and making that the whole field. It becomes an all over thing. You are abstracting figuration, in a way.

TM I think the idea of a career evolution is an interesting one and it may be that, with the distance of history, or more specifically art history, that artists' careers appear more coherent in the way that they evolve. Still, I am struck by the fact that, for an artist who deals so centrally with evolution, in your career there's always a logic to where the next body of work comes from and where it looks like it's going, but it's not linear is it?

MQ No. Well, I think the great discovery that I've made for myself is that I don't need to think about continuity of medium or continuity of style anymore because there is actually a continuity of themes and ideas that holds the whole body of work together. The variation of style and material that gives my career its different facets—like faceting a diamond, or something—means that every new facet sheds light on the other ones and makes the whole thing more coherent.

TM Something I think I've mentioned before and something else that strikes me is that although you deal very much with fluid things—that one idea and meaning

emerges from another or morphs into another—there's some sort of clarity to it all. Often, it seems you are dealing with how amorphous the world actually is, in the way that we experience it, but there is this amazing visual coherence and clarity in the objects or work that you produce. Is that intuitive or is that strategic?

MQ It is intuitive, but I think you are right. I think you need to have that clarity when you have so many different things happening.

TM You're clearly operating like someone in a global culture and your outlook is global, but there is something very specific about a tradition in British art that is landscape based, topographical. There is an obsession in British art, as well, with the notion of mapping. Do you consciously feel, or do you feel yourself emerging from, something intrinsically British or does that have no meaning to you now in the global world sitting, as we are, in a hotel room in Miami?

MQ I think, actually, the British tradition that I feel more aligned to is the kind of tradition of not quite the outsider but of the eccentric—artists on their own path like Hogarth or Bacon, not people working within the 'isms' of the day. It's a general British eccentric tradition rather than specifically a British artists' tradition but, then again, the landscape is important. You are shaped by the geography of where you live but it's more the free thinking kind of British tradition that is inspiring to me and which I feel I fit into.

TM I think that it's very interesting that you pick up on the idea of 'almost' outsiders and eccentricity, which is one of our national characteristics and is part of the way we see ourselves, particularly in relation to characters in your work like Buck and Allannah, who are not British...

MQ Yes.

TM In your work, there's also an interest in the eccentricities of different cultures, isn't there?

MQ Yes, absolutely. I'm interested in what it is to be a person in the world and obviously culture is different but I think the main thing is the commonality between people. Actually, all the people featured in that exhibition at White Cube in Hoxton Square were pretty much American. It's very much the American thing. It's like the reverse of the American dream, of the idea that you can be who you want, and then physically literalising that. That's quite an American theme, I think. We live in quite an American-dominated culture so I guess it's a world theme. At the minute, I'm working with this girl from Africa. She lives in London and was brought up in Paris. She has started all this scarification on herself and she's consciously using the traditions of her family heritage. She's exploring it in a new way and I find that quite interesting. The idea that something which used to be used in a ritual context is now used in a non-ritual context like tattooing, for instance, and the ways in which people reinvent their own rituals. Everyone has their own little story of history, which gives a context to their self-expression.

TM Yes. It's both the idea of the body as a blank canvas on which tattoos or scarification can take place and the idea that you can reconstruct your own body to varying degrees, which is, of course, what the previous sculptures did. And the disability series are also about the reconfiguration of a body, but not by choice...

MQ ...by accident, in its broadest terms. With one, you have been dealt a card of destiny and with the other, you are creating your own destiny. It's interesting to mirror the two, I think. So, in a way, it's all about geography: the geography of a body that has been given to you, the geography of where we live. Is Peter Hull different because his body is a different shape from yours or mine? The idea of the body as geography is the most fundamental primary beginning of geography—it is the land in which we live. Each person's body is their own continent, in a way.

TM And again, I think that's the other overarching theme in your work. I mean history, geography and the body, because almost every piece of work you've ever done explicitly or implicitly refers in some way to the human body and to the way that we

mediate the world through our bodies. It may be an eye, it may be a fragment of a body, it may be a whole body, it may be a monumentalised body or an idealised body or a damaged body, but the body is always there.

MQ You're right. Most recently with the BEFORE AND AFTER HUMANS paintings.

TM It seems to me that the BEFORE AND AFTER HUMANS paintings are amongst the most corporeal of your works because, when I look at them, I find them overwhelming. They swallow me up...

MQ Images of your own body...

TM I can see my own body but I'm also conscious of the origins of all of our bodies in this big, genetic soup.

MQ Yes.

TM Are your shell sculptures fundamentally different or is there a corporeal, real dimension to them?

MQ Oh yes. I mean, they are architecture: they are the home of an animal, but what is amazing about the shells and what I love about them, is this idea that they are like the archaeology of art. Here you have this perfectly symmetrical, beautiful shape, made of this wonderful material that was created by a tiny, brainless creature without a spinal column. So, it sort of makes you think: did we invent art or did we just discover it? Is it intrinsic to the world, or is it something invented, created by humans? I've cast them and then polished the insides so they are reflective. It just struck me as an amazing kind of process, as if someone had been asked to make a scientific model to demonstrate the relationship of the present to the past. You have these rings on the outside of the shell, like the rings in a tree, which represent the time that it took to make the shell, and then the bit inside, the polished bit, is always reflective of and in the present moment.

TM And it always reflects you, the viewer. You can't escape yourself.

MQ Yes. The way in which that part curves and becomes the outer bit is almost like a physical concept. Something that is very difficult to grasp mentally, but when you see it as a shape, you understand it. It takes me back again to the origins of art and the origins of the world and the sea. They link very strongly to the BEFORE AND AFTER HUMANS paintings as well, I think.

TM The other thing about the shells, of course, is their scale. You've played very effectively with scale at various moments in your career but something that's tiny in the hand or even, say, hand-sized, scaled up to something that is human-sized, takes on a more cosmic dimension. This brings me to the bonsai sculptures, another new series, because bonsai trees for me have always looked like scaled-down trees.

MQ Of course, they do. The bonsai is very interesting because there is no such thing as a 'bonsai tree'. There are only trees and the bonsai tree is a tree that has had its roots pruned. It's like the tree that's been subjugated to human desire and interference its whole life. A bonsai has had its little roots cropped and has been kept in a very small amount of soil, but it's been watered and has been given food so it has played out its natural life cycle in a tiny way. If you took that tiny tree out of its pot and planted it in the garden, it would turn into a five-metre tree. It's a bit like a frozen sculpture. In fact, it's only a bonsai tree because humans are keeping the conditions exactly right in order to keep it at that scale. It's not 'natural', it's a kind of human interaction with nature. It's frozen, and that's why I called the series HELD BY DESIRE (SQUARE ROOT). It's only human desire that's holding them into this kind of shape. In this exhibition, I've installed the big, 2.5 metre bonsai tree, which makes us feel like a bonsai, because we become small compared to this enormous tree that we know is originally from a series of small trees. So, in a way, it's back to the idea that although we may think we control nature, once you actually try to control it, you create monsters.

TM And, I suppose, there is something both heroic about man's attempts to control nature and something absurd about it, because it's a futile thing. Which is also the same with our attempt to map the cosmos.

MQ A map is idealistic and absurd. But, in a way, as you say, that is both the worst and the best of human beings. They can be motivated by abstract ideas and have a quest to understand and to map and to control and yet, ultimately, how much control do we actually have?

TM I wonder if, coming full circle, art has something of that dimension to it. The notion that human beings want to make their mark or try and make sense of the world, but at the same time, that it's absurd. Do you see art in those terms?

MQ Absolutely. It's an absurd quest.