

“I’ve Basically Created My Own Saints”: Michael Landy on His Interactive Sculptures at the National Gallery



Michael Landy at his studio in the National Gallery

Photo: Meredith Nichols

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Michael Landy has a knack for the spectacular. For his best-known performance piece, *Break Down* (2001), the artist destroyed all his worldly possessions, including his passport, in a former C&A shop on Oxford Street. In 2010, he set up a huge Art Bin at the South London Gallery, inviting artists to dispose of their unsuccessful creations in order to make a “monument to creative failure.”

Landy has been in residence at London’s **National Gallery** for the last two years, and with the exhibition “Saints Alive” — opening to the public on May 23, 2013 — he is proposing an artistic recycling of a very different kind. Combining parts of different paintings from the collection relating to saints, he came up with

Jean Tinguely-inspired, interactive fibreglass sculptures of saints enacting their martyrdom.

Using a foot pedal, viewers can get Landy’s St Apollonia (based on **Lucas Cranach the Elder’s St Catherine Altarpiece**) to bash her own mouth with the pliers that famously pulled her teeth out. Visitors are also encouraged to spin St Catherine Wheel, activate St Francis to win a t-shirt bearing the Franciscan vows “poverty, chastity, and obedience,” or to get a “doubting Thomas” finger poke into a headless Christ’s chest.

A couple of weeks ahead of the grand opening, Landy welcomed **BLOUIN ARTINFO UK** in his National Gallery studio.

You’ve been artist-in-residence at the National Gallery for over two years. How would you sum up this experience?

I don’t know how you summarize it — I suppose the feeling of being unworthy. I didn’t come here with any particular idea of what I was going to do, because I didn’t know the collection. I don’t paint, so for all those reasons, I knew I would be on a hiding to nothing, and that I would never be good enough.

Did this feeling change over time?

Not really, no. And I think that’s fine. Contemporary art and the National Gallery are kind of weird bedfellows anyway, because it looks slightly out of kilter with what else is going on.

How did you come up with this idea of working on the saints and their martyrdom in particular?

I just noticed there were 35 St Catherine Wheels in the collection. Sometimes she’s portrayed holding the wheel, sometimes it’s a fragment of wheel, sometimes it’s in the foreground, sometimes it’s in the background. That’s how people got to know who St Catherine was, through the wheel. I just started writing down the amount of repetitions, [wondering] why there were so many wheels in the collection. And then I started to read about the **Golden Legend**, the stories behind the saints. So it’s the stories that drove me in first of all, and then I like symbols, and I like how people would be able to tell one from the other before people could read or write. That’s how they knew their saints.

The first saint was St Catherine. A roman guy, an emperor, falls in love with her, he tries to get her to worship his pagan gods, which she refuses to do, there are various tortures, he gets scholars involved to try and change her mind, but she turns them all over into Christians and they are all killed. I think he gets exasperated so in the end, he puts her on a wheel to torture her and then an angel comes down, splits the wheel, kills 4,000 pagans, and the emperor must think: “I’ve had enough of this,” so he cuts her head off, and milk flows from her body, and then her body is taken up to Mount Sinai for burial. It’s the stories that pull you in.

One of the first things that crossed my mind was to start painting but I thought: “where do you begin with that?” So in the end, I started to take bits from various paintings and cobbled them together, so it’s like kinetic art meets Renaissance art. Basically, I loved the **Jean Tinguely** exhibition at **Tate** in 1982, and I wanted to reinvent that, to reformulate it in another way for the National Gallery — because it’s a very public place.

Thinking about your practice, and what you are best-known for, *Break Down*, I was wondering if it’s fair to say that you’ve moved from destruction to recycling?

Yes. I think about this as being Frankenstein-like. You are re-animating body parts for a whole new audience in a sense. The saints have been junked, I come along and scavenge bits from the National Gallery collection and I put them together, although, like Frankenstein’s monster, they don’t fit together.

This relation to Tinguely has long been key, and it’s becoming increasingly visible in your recent work.

The National Gallery is such a public place. I wanted to do something that would somehow involve the public. So I see the public as the missing element in the work. It doesn’t come alive until you put your foot on the pedal or spin the giant St Catherine Wheel, or operate St Francis to try and win a t-shirt. It’s very populist, I’m fully aware of that. But I think this is it with me and Tinguely. I’ve taken it as far I possibly could.

You say your sculptures were “populist.” Do you think that it could be an issue if the show was perceived as the National Gallery dumbing its content down?

I see what you mean, possibly. I guess here, the paintings don’t make noises, my things will make noises, bits will fall off them. Here they are trying to conserve things — I’m trying to do the reverse. Yes, we are at odds.

Equally, your sculptures could be perceived as go-betweens, giving the audience an entrance point into the collection.

Yes, it’s a connection. I’ve made a connection with the gallery, which I never had before, and I’m making that by making art. I’ve basically created my own saints from the collection. They kind of animate themselves, so I like the idea that they come back alive for a whole new audience, introducing people to St Jerome but in a different way.

To finish this interview, could you tell me about the relationship between your sculptures and the works on paper?

The collages and drawings came first. That’s basically how I originate everything, it’s via drawing. I’ve drawn all the St Catherine wheels in the collection. I’ve also made a collage of all the St Catherine wheels in the collection — it’s like a junk yard of wheels. I’ve got all the arrows of St Sebastian in one chest, I’ve also got all the stigmata in the collection on one St Francis.

So in a way, drawings and works on paper come before and after the conception of the project.

Yes, it’s such a natural thing for me to draw. It’s not something I even register.

Michael Landy, Saints Alive, May 23 – November 24, 2013, National Gallery, London

An exhibition gathering drawings produced by Landy over the last twenty years, including some made for the National Gallery project, will be on show at Thomas Dane Gallery next June.

20 Years of Pressing Hard: Michael Landy, Drawings 1993-2013, June 5 – July 27, 2013, Thomas Dane Gallery, London

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