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News

Tortured icons step out of their gallery frames

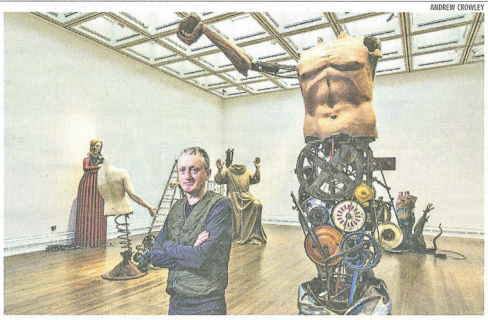
Exhibition Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Michael Landy: Saints Alive
National Gallery, WC2
★★★☆☆

The saints have come marching out at the National Gallery. Stepping out of the canvases of the Old Masters, they take on a new, three-dimensional and — often quite literally — striking form in an exhibition by the artist in residence, Michael Landy, that opens today.

Saint Apollonia stands at the entrance, a red robed giantess who greets you clutching a pair of pliers like a microphone in her hand. When she lifts it you can almost hear the bloodcurdling shriek as this pious Roman martyr, whom Lucas Cranach depicted with downcast-eyed serenity, cranks into sudden mechanical action and yanks a tooth from her jawbone with a bone-grinding tug. A legendary tale of brutal torture springs to alarming new life.

ANDREW CROWLEY



Michael Landy has created an eye-stretching army of religious contraptions

Raiding dumps and skips for old pram wheels and bits of wire and strips of discarded metal, Landy has created an eye-stretching army of religious contraptions and brought them swivelling and bashing, cranking and thumping, spinning and whirring to life. Christ's torso, mounted Zebedee-style upon a rusting spring, is poked by the finger of a doubting Thomas so forcibly that its fibreglass hollows echo round the gallery as it rocks and rebounds and almost topples from its spring. At the touch of a foot pedal, St Jerome thumps his chest with a rock. A so-called "multi-saint" brings together the bizarre attributes of a host of martyrs.

St Lawrence's griddle heats up like an electric bar while St Peter Martyr strikes scimitar blows to his skull and St Lucy proffers her plucked-out eyes on a plate.

It's a mind-curdling mixture of the gruesomely brutal and the downright silly, of the fairground sideshow and the symbol of profound faith. But Landy is an artist who for all his showmanship is concerned about the message beneath. This, after all, is the man who took over an Oxford Street shopping emporium and sent all his worldly goods — from his car through his clothes and the paintings given to him by fellow Brit artists to his toothbrush — along a conveyor belt to be destroyed. It was an eye-catching commentary on consumerism.

Now in *Saints Alive* he reopens the eyes of the shuffling gallery-goer to the force of certain pictures in the National Gallery's all but unparalleled Early Renaissance collection. But, in so doing, he ask us also to reconsider the gruesome strangeness, the sadistic violence, the self-sacrificing conviction or motivational purity of the stories upon which have been built up a Christian faith.

Admission free, until Nov 24