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Michael Landy: Saints Alive



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Reviewed by Glenn Adamson

Everywhere you turn in this presentation of *Saints Alive*, an exhibition by the British artist Michael Landy, you are told how surprising a selection he was for the gallery's artist-in-residence programme. The introductory text panel, the accompanying film, and the catalogue all note Landy's lack of obvious qualifications for the job. He's not a painter. He has no particular interest in the Old Masters (indeed had scarcely ever visited the National Gallery, even as a child). And he is best known for destroying things.

If readers of *Crafts* know Landy's name, it is most likely to be for his 2001 work *Break Down*, in which he systematically destroyed every item in his possession, running them one by one through a shredder. More recently, he invited other artists to toss their works into a massive rubbish heap (Art Bin, South London Gallery, 2010). And Landy has a long-time fascination with Jean Tinguely, who specialised in kinetic sculptures designed to destroy themselves. So the National Gallery was indeed being brave in inviting him into its august halls.

But actually the results of his residency could not be more congenial to the needs of a 21st century museum. The exhibition is wildly entertaining, while providing clear routes into the historic collection. It's an education department's dream come true.

The show includes seven over-life-size sculptures, several of which are figural automata which engage in jerky, aggressive action. A graceful figure of Saint Apollonia, based on the Gallery's picture by Lucas Cranach the Elder, bashes herself in the face with a tooth held in a pair of pincers. A headless Saint Jerome smacks its chest thunderously with a rock. A disembodied pointing finger, representing Doubting Thomas, pokes itself incessantly into Christ's wounded torso. Other pieces are less violent. There is a giant Saint Francis that functions as a lucky dip (you might just win a T-shirt), and a Catherine wheel inscribed with various aspects of the saint's biography, which viewers are invited to spin and 'win the crown of martyrdom'. The effect is that of a Biblically themed seaside arcade.

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Landy candidly says that in devising this body of work, he was 'going for the populist vote'. He's not alone. In the past decade, the funfair aesthetic has become one of the dominant strains in fine art. This dynamic is especially pronounced here in Britain, where public funding obligates museums to seek ever-larger audiences. Carsten Höller's slides at Tate Modern, the Hayward Gallery's carnival-esque exhibition programme (*Psycho Buildings*, *Walking in My Mind*) and Jeremy Deller's recent work *Sacrilege*, in which Stonehenge is rendered as a bouncy castle, are all salient precursors.

As is so often the case in this age of the art spectacular, Landy has turned to outside help to realise his ideas. In this case the work was done by MDM, London's largest art fabricator (they are to British contemporary art what the engineering firm Arup is to architecture). It is to the credit of the National Gallery that they acknowledge this mode of distributed production. In the interpretive film that accompanies the show, you can see Landy consulting at MDM's workshop in Herne Hill – a site normally closed to outsiders. Speaking of Stonehenge, there is a hilarious moment right out of *Spinal Tap* when Landy sees one of his sculptures for the first time and exclaims, 'It's much bigger than I imagined!' One of the workshop craftsmen replies tersely, 'It's the size you drew it.')

The sculptures in *Saints Alive* are indeed beautifully made, mash-ups of hand-painted body parts and found mechanical elements – further testimony to MDM's capabilities – and this is an important factor in the project's success. Landy's creations may be comical, but their immaculate physical facture helps them come across as serious tributes to centuries-old works of art, and the stories they tell.

For most visitors, these religious paintings have lost their power. They no longer inspire reverence. Landy has revived an obsolete iconography by exaggerating its strangeness. After viewing these sculptures, one does return to the paintings with a new appreciation for the psychological complexity of Christianity, its unstable mix of otherworldliness and sado-masochism.

Yet there is something a little depressing in all this. Landy's strenuous efforts to bring these pictures back to life remind us of just how remote they have become for most visitors. He has reimagined religious art for a secular, distracted society that is itself saturated in violent imagery. For better or worse, he hit the nail right on the head.

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