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SUNSPEL NEWS

SUNSPEL INTERVIEW: MICHAEL LANDY

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"If I did it again, obviously I'd never put any of my Sunspel gear into the shredder!" A strange statement perhaps, but a touching one coming from Michael Landy, a man who once intentionally destroyed every single one of his worldly possessions, and the artist behind our [limited edition Frieze t-shirt](#).

Currently the Associate Artist at the National Gallery, London-born Michael Landy is perhaps best known for 2001's [Break Down](#), during which he systematically catalogued then shredded every single one of his 7,227 possessions over the course of a week.

Landy's work is as thought provoking as it is wide-ranging: [Acts of Kindness](#) (2011) collects moments of unexpected compassion on the London Underground, relying on the public to document these touching and personal encounters; [Art Bin](#) (2010) saw Landy invite the public and established artists to dispose of their 'creative failures' into a 600 cubic meter see-through bin at the South London Gallery; upcoming work includes kinetic sculptures of Saints, inspired by his current tenure at the National Gallery.

A long-time fan of Sunspel, we recently met up with Michael at his studio at the National Gallery for a chat and a behind-the-scenes look at his studio.

You're exhibiting in this year's Frieze Sculpture Garden. How's that coming along?

Yeah, it's a bin. It's a bronze bin. It looks like a plastic bin, but it's actually bronze. It's a self portrait: it's me as a rubbish bin.

About 25 years ago BANK Magazine referred to me as a "top rubbish artist" – which was a bit underhand, but I had to agree with them – so this is just me living up to my reputation.

And have you made this piece specifically for Frieze, or is this something you've been working on for a while?

Well, I'm planning on making a whole series of sculptures, inspired by Cezanne's *The Bathers*...but as bins. Actually, bins have featured quite heavily for me over the years – *Scapheap Services*, *Art Bin*, *Break Down*.

Actually, here in the National Gallery I'm not going to touch



Michael Landy wears Sunspel moss merino v-neck over a grey melange crew t-shirt and navy chinos.

any bins – I've decided to put it on hold while I'm here.

Can we talk about your position here at the National Gallery? In theory you're here to be inspired and surrounded by these 'Old Masters' – has that been informing and influencing the work you've done whilst here?

Well, actually no-one sat me down and talked to me about that. Which is good really; all that's been said is that it has to 'reflect the collection'. That's all anyone's ever really told me.

When I first came here, I spent a lot of time looking at the collection – because it wasn't anywhere I came when I was younger to be honest – so I had to get to know it a bit. And then I spent a year thinking "What am I doing here?"....which is normal apparently. Because when you first arrive, you just think "I'm not worthy"! It's a losing battle – you know you're never going to be good enough in some respects...but you also know that you're the only one alive!

So for me, first of all I don't paint. And 99% of the collection is paintings. I actually considered having lessons – having a crash course in painting – but decided against it.

But being here has completely influenced my work. At the moment I'm working on a few pieces focusing on Saints. Because that really struck me, when I first walked around – how many saints were featured in the paintings.

And the first one that struck me was St Katherine, who's patron saint of learning. They actually struck her from the calendar – occasionally modern historians will remove Saints that they don't believe existed in the first place – but basically she turned down a Roman suitor, and he tries to persuade her to marry him, and she refuses as she's already had a mystic marriage to Christ. So she tries to convert him, and he in turn tries to convert her, and in the end she's strung onto a wheel – hence the Catherine Wheel – but a thunderbolt thrown by an angel splits the wheel and saves her. But it's all in vain: the Romans cut off her head, whereupon milk started flowing from her body. And she's taken up to Mount Sanai to be buried by 400 angels.

That's the sort of thing that really interests me. There's a thing called the Golden Legend, which tells you the stories of all the Saints; so using that, I'm making a sculpture at the moment of St Jerome – a kinetic sculpture – but basically I've taken different parts of the body from different paintings in the collection here at the National Gallery: an arm from here, a chest from there, the leg from somewhere else.

I then had somebody model them and cast them in fibreglass and paint them....with which I'll make kinetic sculptures.

It's quite similar to my credit card shredding machine from last years *Frieze* – quite anarchic; a tendency to break down. They're quite human machines in a lot of ways.

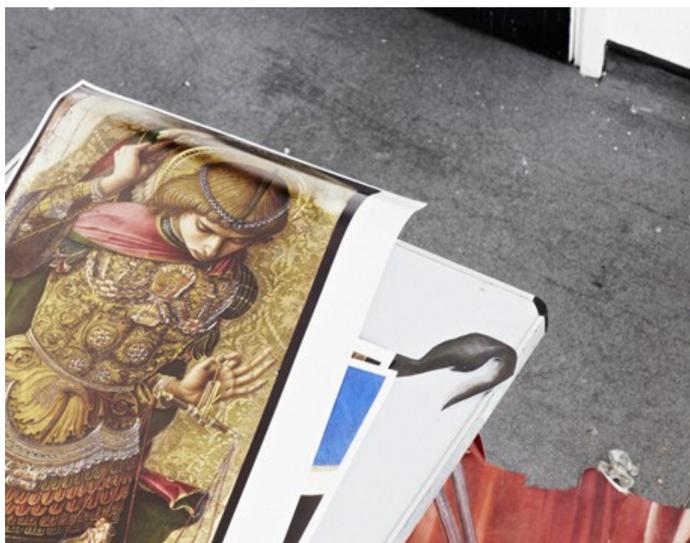
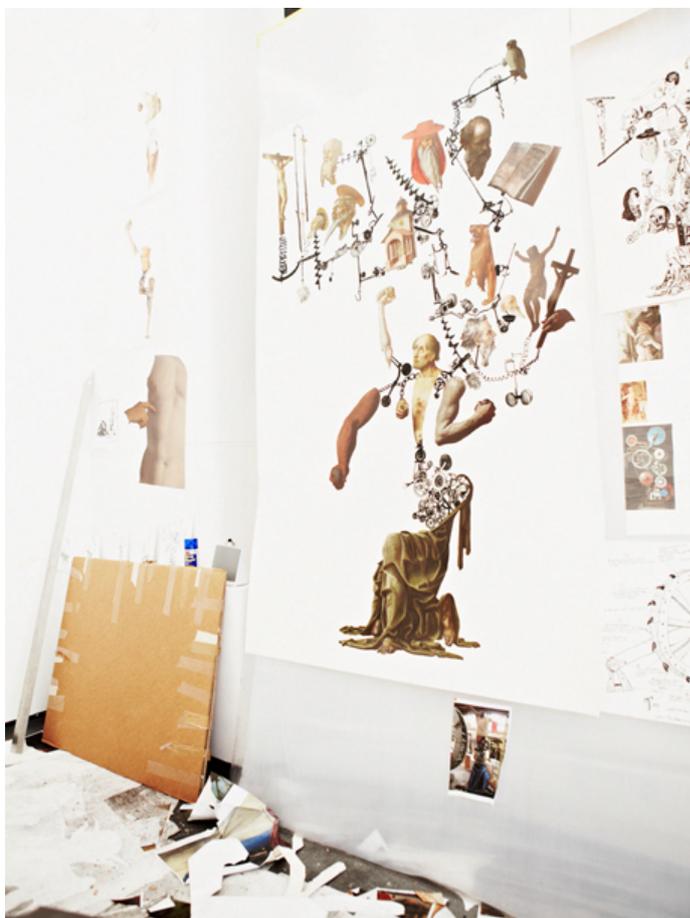
St Jerome venerates himself by beating himself with a rock on his chest – it's an image that appears in a lot of the paintings here at the NG, especially in works from the renaissance. So he's a hermit, a scholar and...an old man with a six pack.

So I just thought...everybody at one point – before reading writing was widely taught – would know their Saints. And they would know their Saints by their attributes. I guess I'm trying to make them come alive. To animate them somehow.

I like the idea of them being thrown away, like rubbish, and then me cobbling their parts together and sort of putting them back together.

I'm also doing a Wheel of Fortune for St Catherine – so people will be able to spin this great big wheel and then it'll have various 'fortunes': "In answer to your prayers, the angel of the Lord will miraculously destroy the spiked wheel on which you've been condemned to die"...or "Angels will soothe your wounds". Which is nice. But then I'm a nice guy.

Which leads nicely to your most recent work – Acts of Kindness. Were



you worried about the reaction you were going to get?

Well, it's easy to pooh-pooh kindness and be cynical about it. But I think that I couldn't have done this work 20 years ago – because I would've thought: "An artist dealing with kindness? All sounds a bit squelchy", and I'd feel very uncomfortable about it. And that's part of what interested me about it in the first place: trying to articulate that – trying to work out what contemporary kindness can be.

Has the greater change been a personal one, or do you think society's attitudes have shifted enough to make you want to try this piece?

Well, I've changed. And I think I literally couldn't have done it 20 years ago, but I can't quite put into words why I can do it now.

I often think of it in connection with *Break Down* really – one couldn't come without the other. Immediately after *Break Down* I started thinking about *kindness*. And at that point I started thinking what I could do with kindness. But there are certain rules with *kindness*: you can't have it in an art gallery – it needs to be in a place like the Tube; a place with *structure*.

On London Underground, people just wordlessly bump into one another, in their little bubble, and so lots of people think there's no kindness there. But I think that's just because people are cut off from it – reading their papers or listening to their music or whatever. But I actually think there's a lot of kindness down there – I think you'd be surprised.

And so then I started to dwell on why would someone be kind to a stranger...why would you even bother to do that? Why would you put yourself out for that? But I think that actually to an extent, people want to connect with one another. And that's I think what's happened in the past 20 years: as I've gotten older then I've could have a connection with people more than I could have 20 or 30 years ago.

And presumably the reward for that connection would simply be the connection itself?

Well...people talk about 'help is high'. It all about connection of Self to Other. And to feel that we are all connected to each other – that we're not just separate entities going about our business.

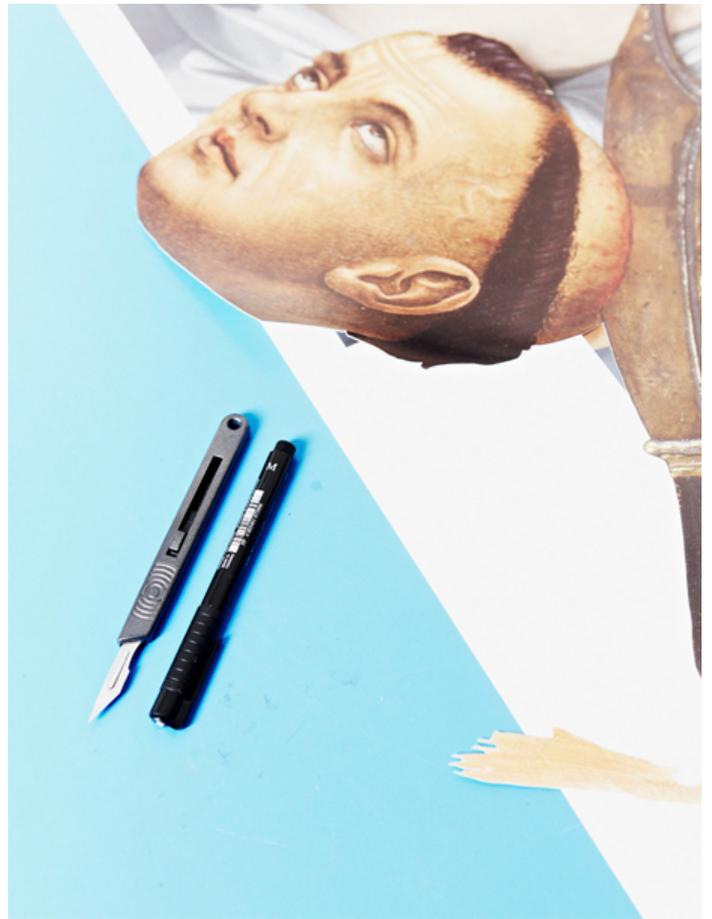
And I'm just talking about everyday acts of kindness, not superhuman acts of generosity. That's what I'm interested in, the everyday – well, I'm very interested in the everyday in general – but the *everydayness* of it really. And that's what I wanted to celebrate with the stories – I really like the idea that someone could be having a bad day and they could read one of the stories and it could cheer them up. Y'know: they're having a really shitty day...maybe someone stole their Oyster Card...and they read one of these stories and they realise that the world's not such a bad place.

And that's why sometimes when I'm feeling a bit miserable I read the stories. They've got them all gathered on the TFL website. And there's hundreds now!

But I like the little ones – you know, someone's got shaving foam on their ear and someone else points it out; or...one of my favourites is where a guy's sitting opposite a girl who looks a bit miserable. So he makes her an origami horse and drops it in her lap as he gets off the caridge. So he doesn't have an embarrassing exchange – he picks up on her being unhappy, with this small token she realises that y'know...she's not alone. He obviously realised that he could do something about it. And at a very simple level it changed things – she says "a light came on in the pit".

You've chosen one of the drawings from your Nourishment series to feature on the Frieze x Sunspel collaborative t-shirt. Can you tell us more about that?

Yeah, they're all urban weeds. This etching is of Shepards Purse. It grew all over the estate where I grew up and the first



plant I became aware of – because I haven't got green fingers in the slightest – was Sheperd Purse, because it grows in these tiny little cracks in the pavement.

And I just started to think about how amazing that is: how a living organism could grow out of the tiniest crack! And survive!

I did try to grow some, but they just died – they don't like being looked after; they're quite solitary. They're plants that end up on building sites – they like being on wasteland.

Shepards Purse is also known as 'Mother's Heart' because the pods look like hearts and children used to play games with each other, where they'd spilt the pod and say "You've just broken your mothers heart!". It also appears in a Bruegel painting. So I really like them because they're stoical little things and they grow amongst all the rubbish.

Having said that, I didn't know I was going to spend the next year drawing them!

You drew the Nourishment works ten years ago – do you feel differently about them now?

I think things become different when you look back on them. I mean they're the only works of mine that I've got on my walls at home. I don't like having 'art' on my walls, but these I can cope with, because they're quite...neutral. And that's what I like about them at home – they're neutral.

But I'm etching a living plant: I dig them up and I take them home, and I look after them – put them on a plate and there'll be bugs running around the plate, and they'll be flowering while I'm drawing them. But they're dying at the same time.

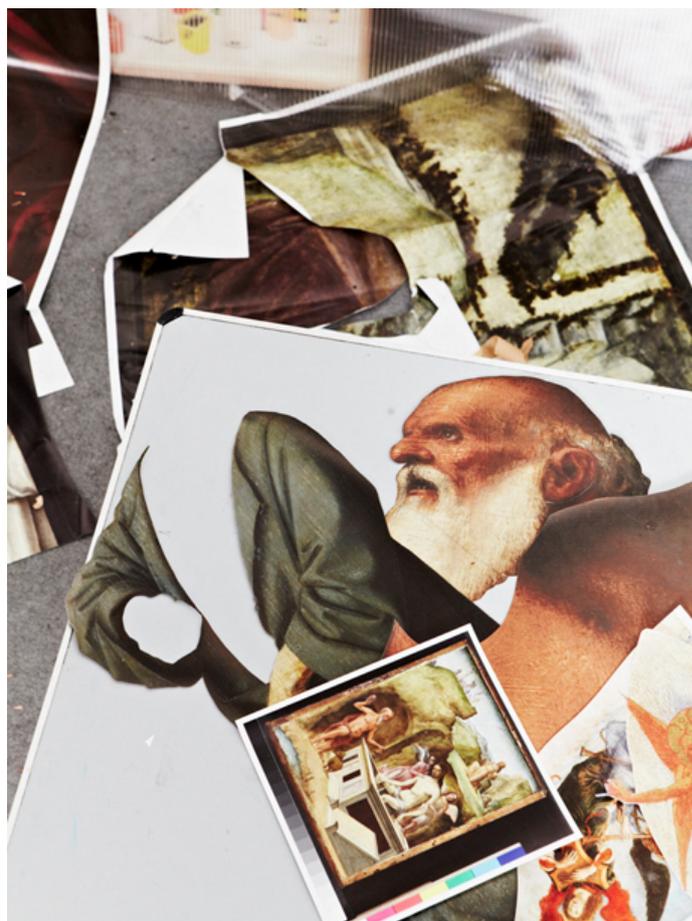
It was probably at the height of my abilities as an etcher, because your eyes start to give in, and I got a tendon problem in my finger from the etching – because the etching needle makes lovely fine marks that you can't get with pen, but it's so fine that eventually you start damaging your eyes and hands.

But I'd never made anything that I'd term 'beautiful' before – I've always had a problem with the term 'beauty' anyway – so these are the closest I've come.

Break Down took place in the old C&A space on Oxford Street – now home to Primark; the embodiment of 'disposable fashion' and the antithesis of what we do at Sunspel – which got me thinking about craft, and about suitability of use. Did the process of acquiring possessions change for you after Break Down?

I think the thing was that I was a happy consumer for the first 37 years of my life, but after making an inventory of all my possessions and systematically destroying them...it changes everything. Or actually at the beginning it does – after a while it becomes an abstract thought. It also becomes a millstone around your neck – you know, you can base the rest of your work around something like that, but I really wanted to do other things.

But I don't really like possessions, so I don't ever have too many. I'm always having clear-outs, or I just don't have them in the first place. Having said that, if I ever did it all again, obviously I'd never put any of my Sunspel gear into the shredder!



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