

# The Notebook

'Imagination will take you everywhere'

## Michael Landy's Saints: Alive and Kicking



Conceptual artist and sculptor, Michael Landy has an obvious penchant for destruction. His previous major exhibitions include, *Break Down* (Art angel, 2001) in which he obliterated all 7,227 of his material possessions, including his car and birth certificate. He made a list of everything he owned before sending them along a conveyor belt and crunching them into smithereens inside a former C & A store on Oxford Street. He walked away with nothing but the overalls he was wearing. *Art Bin* (2010) is one of Landy's more recent exhibitions, in which he invited anyone and everyone to throw away their failed artwork into a giant communal bin inside South London Gallery. In Landy's words the bin became "a monument to creative failure" which raised issues surrounding destruction, disposal, importance and possession.

Landy's latest exhibition is his first as resident artist of The National Gallery and continues with the theme of destruction. Entitled, *Saints Alive*, it features a collection of vast kinetic sculptures inspired by the depiction of saints in the museum's collection of medieval and Renaissance works. But tranquil, divine and heavenly depictions these are not. My first impression of the exhibition while waiting in the queue was that it sounded like a torture chamber; clanging, banging, whirring and squeaking noises emanated from the Sunley Room – people around me buzzed with excitement; what is making that noise? After being handed an orange disc I was permitted entry to explore. What I discovered was truly shocking. Shocking not only because these sculptures came aggressively to life but also shocking in the

fact that this was occurring inside The National Gallery, a place where solemn looking guards snap 'no photography' and 'do not touch'. Now I was faced with the opportunity to literally deface several priceless works of art and what's more, I was encouraged to do so.



Upon entering the Sunley Room I was immediately met with an exceptionally tall, willowy blonde. A rather naïve looking *Saint Apollonia* stared down at me, her eye lids heavy and drooping. She exuded a melancholy edge which I only fully understood a moment later. She burst into life as soon as I pressed the foot pedal; violently shoving the pliers she held into her delicate rose-bud lips, destroying her fragile beauty. This depiction is supposed to represent her being tortured by having her teeth pulled out, as the legend goes, which is why the saints intrigued Landy. It wasn't just the religious aspect which influenced the artist (he comes from a family of Irish Catholics), but also the way each saint has an individual story and attributes. Of course, being Michael Landy it was the more bizarre aspects of these tales which interested him.



The second room was bigger. Initially I thought it resembled a bombsite; five piles of mechanical junk lay scattered across the floor. But as my eyes grew accustomed to the sight I could just make out five sculptures. Black lines surrounding each sculpture told the viewer to beware: danger. I felt as if my life may be at risk. *Saint Jerome* stood towering above me; a body fragmented with a labyrinth of turning wheels, his only arm extended out, a rock clasped within his hand ready to launch it at the nearest passer-by. I nervously pressed the foot pedal,

flinching at the thought of what was to come. The sculpture whirred and creaked, the wheels suddenly whizzed as *Saint Jerome* repeatedly smashed the rock against his chest, chipping the paintwork. Legend has it that he beat his chest with a rock to prevent himself having impure sexual thoughts, thus conveying the nature of martyrdom. Later I watched as an unsuspecting schoolboy pressed the foot pedal and a look of absolute horror crossed his face; terrified at the shockingly abrupt movements of the sculpture.

Landy's passion with all things mechanical started when he saw an exhibition by the 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss artist, Jean Tinguely. He loved the way his work involved the viewer, by getting them to interact with the sculpture. All of Tinguely's sculptures were made of junk, which is how Landy conceived the idea for his latest venture. I particularly liked the interactive element of the exhibition, which caused an eruption of laughter and gasps whenever a sculpture was commanded into life; a stark contrast to the hushed silence which permeated throughout the neighbouring rooms.

Landy's aim was to portray the saints as "single-minded characters", whilst also depicting the state between an object's construction, use, failure and ruin; thus linking back to his fascination with destruction. He created the sculptures with the help of model makers MDM Props using materials such as fibre glass, plaster and paint. Landy's initial ideas can be seen adorning the walls of the first room, which include paintings and collages of the sculptures, including one of a torso pierced by dozens of bloodied arrows; thus foreshadowing the ominous sense of death and demolition that pervades within the next room.



One such sculpture, entitled *Doubting Thomas* is based on a Cima da Conegliano painting of St Thomas, the doubter, who refused to believe in the resurrection of Christ, until he had actually felt Christ's wounds himself. Landy portrays this particular story effectively through the simple plaster cast of a torso (representing Christ) held upright by a giant spring, opposite is a mechanical contraption of rods and bolts with a pointing hand at the top (St Thomas's). When I press the iron foot pedal, the hand springs into action with the finger brutally prodding the chest, making the torso jump backwards. The paintwork on the chest of Christ already bears the scars of St Thomas's doubt, but this is Landy's intention; these sculptures are meant to eventually destroy themselves.

It's fair to say that Landy's exhibition is basically a mish-mash of bits and bobs; super-human

contraptions made of junk – an arm there, a chest here, a head being attacked by a cleaver. *Saints Alive* is exactly that; Landy is resurrecting the saints in a modern context – giving them 'new life'. The main question people will ask about this exhibition is; can this really be classified as art? Many traditionalists will say no but others will argue that this is Landy's creation; he's trying to depict something that will get an emotional response from the viewer and surely that is the basis of all art.

## 2 Comments on “Michael Landy's Saints: Alive and Kicking”

Jeff

July 10, 2013



He's worth chatting with if he's there on one of the exhibition days. Very open-minded thinker about art.

Nicely constructed piece about his show. Good luck with your journalism.

Reply

Jessie Williams

July 10, 2013



Thank you very much for your comment. I'd loved to have had a chat with him, I'm sure he's a very interesting person – he's created some unique, though-provoking pieces of art.

Reply

This entry was posted on July 10, 2013 by Jessie Williams in Art and tagged art, Art Bin, Break Down, Doubting Thomas, Michael Landy's 'Saints Alive', Saint Apollonia, Saint Jerome, saints, sculptures, The National Gallery.

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