

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Michael Landy's Basel Moment

By HANNAH OLIVENNES JUNE 16, 2016



Michael Landy, known for his focus on destruction and impermanence, is having his first retrospective outside Britain at the Museum Tinguely in Basel, Switzerland. Credit: Benedikt Frank

Michael Landy has been a fixture of Britain's art scene for more than 20 years. Born and raised in London, he studied art at Goldsmiths in the late 1980s with Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and other students who became known as the Young British Artists. Their specialty was using unusual techniques to create art. Most of Mr. Landy's installations involve kinetics, and often revolve around destruction: "Break Down," a performance from 2001, saw him systematically destroy 7,227 items, representing all his belongings. More recently, he transformed a gallery in London into a 130,000-

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gallon trash can called “Art Bin,” in which he threw stacks of artwork he selected from online submissions.

This month, his first solo exhibition outside Britain opens in Basel, Switzerland, at the Museum Tinguely, showing most of his works since 1990.

Mr. Landy spoke recently in his very bare home and studio in East London.

Q. How did the Basel exhibition come about?

A. I saw an exhibition of Jean Tinguely in 1982 when I was a textile student and I really loved it. Years later, I partly curated an exhibition at Tate Liverpool and had some of my own works in it, and I had a conversation with the director of the Tinguely Museum about one of my collages that is a machine designed to destroy the Tinguely museum. The idea is that I broke into the museum, stole all Tinguely sculptures, and cannibalized them into this huge machine that will destroy the Tinguely museum. That’s how we started our conversation, really.

Q. You’ve often talked about how inspired you’ve been by Jean Tinguely, so that this exhibition is held at the museum dedicated to him must be such an accomplishment.



“Multi-Saint,” 2013. Credit Michael Landy/Thomas Dane Gallery, London

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A. This is my first major exhibition outside of the U.K. Obviously people know my work in this country, but not abroad. It'll be interesting to see what people make of it. It really is like a homecoming in a way. When Tinguely did his sculptures, he was in his 30s. I don't think he imagined that 40 years later a museum would have his name. Obviously in 1982, I didn't even know what an artist was. I didn't know you could become an artist. I was just a fan of Tinguely.

Q. How much did Tinguely influence your career?

A. Tinguely is the first artist I had a real visceral reaction to and thought, "Wow." I saw people laughing and smiling and it just had a massive effect on me. Later on, after I destroyed all my worldly belongings in 2001, I also became very interested in a work he made called "Homage to New York," a piece of work that destroyed itself in 27 minutes. I started a documentary about it, made lots of drawings, fake fragments, because at the end of the exhibition people could take pieces of the sculpture with them. It was one of the first happening pieces.

When I did my show at the National Gallery ["Saints Alive," in 2013], some people even mistook my pieces for Tinguely sculptures. I wanted the public to engage in a different way to how they engage with the paintings at the National Gallery. I wanted people to literally participate. But at the National Gallery you're supposed to keep quiet; if you touch a painting, the conservation team are called in. My things were breaking down, bits were falling off. They didn't know what to do with it. The emails between the National Gallery and the people fixing the machines were very funny.

Q. You're 53. How does it feel to have a retrospective of your work?

A. I never thought I'd get to this point, so it's quite scary looking back over my career. I always thought I'd never do a retrospective. I thought I would have destroyed works myself, or they were design to be destroyed. A lot of my stuff doesn't last anyway. And some of things were just too expensive to store.

I'm sort of in denial of it so I tried to create something with it all, a whole thing with all the pieces. Otherwise, it's Landy's Greatest Hits and it's boring. Creatively, it's dull. Somehow you need to look at it afresh and make it come alive for yourself. Otherwise it's just some turgid thing that one has to do when you get to 50. They make you do it.

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"Self Portrait As Rubbish Bin," 2012. Credit Richard Ivey/Galerie Sabine Knust, München and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

Q. The exhibition runs during Art Basel. Do you go to many art fairs?

A. No, not really. Everything has sort of morphed into other things these days. Auction houses are now galleries, art fairs and now exhibitions, artists are now entrepreneurs, collectors sell as well. There is no clear delineation. When I left art school, the first art fair I went to suddenly made me realize that it's a huge international business. Until then, the scale hadn't really hit me. Now you hear of artists that have a team of people that go from one fair to another fair. I find it quite difficult to think of an artwork without the artist and the rest of his work, his studio, around it. It's hard. And at the same time, art fairs are interesting. In the end, people do the fairs because they sell. Apparently people don't buy in galleries anymore, they only buy in fairs.

Q. You're still referred to as a Young British Artist. Did you ever consider yourself part of that movement?

A. No. Obviously I am part of it, but when all of that was going on, I was making cut-out figures from rubbish for about two and a half years. No one was interested in me and I felt sorry for myself. I never really felt part of it. But I'm sure if you ask all those people as a whole, it was just a sticker that we got.

Q. This exhibition showcases a lot of your pieces. For someone who tried to destroy everything he ever owned, you've still got a lot of your work left.

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A. Yes, I was thinking that. But I recreated a lot of things, like the Markets piece. And most of this work is from 2001 onwards.

Q. *At the end of the show in June, will you be tempted to run a wrecking ball through it all?*

A. It depends on how the exhibition goes. No, some of this stuff belongs to people, some of it will get destroyed. But in the end, "Break Down" was an artwork, not a way of life. I want to carry on making things as long as possible.

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/16/arts/international/michael-landys-basel-moment.html?_r=1