

Marc Quinn, *Self*, 1991



Date: 1991

Size: 208 x 63 x 63 cm

Materials: blood (artist's), stainless steel, Perspex and refrigeration equipment

Location: (originally collection of Charles Saatchi, now collection of Steve Cohen, New York)

Nationality: British

Scope of work for Pearson Edexcel A Level: Identities in art [and architecture]: 3D Self-Portrait

Digital image courtesy of Marc Quinn. Photo: Marc Quinn studio

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter: Marc Quinn's *Self* (better known as 'blood head') of 1991 is a play on the traditional genre of self-portrait sculpture, commemorating him as a 27 year old man, and already bald. It is



Figure 1 Marble bust of a man, mid-1st century CE, height 36.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (12.233)

unusual in that it is a head only, no bust or torso, rather like the Ancient Roman life-size veristic heads of Emperors (see below), which were used to replace their predecessors' heads on full size bodies. The exterior details are the result of life-casting with his eyes closed; these are no 'windows to the soul', instead he looks as though he is sleeping or dead. This mortality suggests vulnerability, the head functions as a 'memento mori' (reminder of death) rather like a skull. Heads are also traditionally associated with the intellect, especially in male portraits. This is the only masculine element as Quinn is objectified with a neutral expression; there is no muscular body, or tensed muscles

or active outward gaze, the usual signifiers of masculinity. He is either thinking, or sleeping, or decomposing – indeed it is similar to a death mask, despite the slightly wry smile, or a guillotined severed head. Unlike most portraits this visual autobiography focuses entirely on his facial features; it gives no clues on his status, wealth, or power. Nor is there any expression to indicate his psychological state. However, its shock value is directly linked to the personal propaganda of British artists at the time.

Formal qualities: Despite the initial appearance with an irregular silhouette, at one level this is a realistic figurative self-portrait concerned with recognisable external features in three-dimensions. It is designed to be walked around and appreciated close-up from every angle within its Perspex box. It is solid, and weighty, with its unfinished effect, the direct result of the process. Protruding elements such as the nose, forehead, bald head and cheeks are smooth like skin, while the details of the closed eyelids and eyelashes are caught in frozen detail. The chin looks damaged as the cast was roughly removed; there is a range of textures. Ears are pinned back unnaturally and merge into the hair for the least naturalistic elements of the work. Disturbing, wound-like lines vertically down each cheek result from the meeting of the front and back sections of the cast. Colour dominates with the mottled red to purple to brown of the frozen blood suggesting organic decomposition rather than violence or aggression. What is usually liquid and inside the body – blood – is expressed as the hard frozen crystalline exterior surface of the head with a calm expression.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Marc Quinn has a background in Art History, with no formal training in art. In 1986 he graduated from Cambridge University with a degree in History & History of Art and plenty of ideas. In 1983 he had worked as an assistant to the sculptor Barry Flanagan (famous for his hares) and learnt bronze casting, which was no longer taught in British art schools. *Self* (1991) makes many art historical subject and style references – to Ancient Roman veristic portraits, to the colour, texture, and senses of the seventeenth century Baroque, to the ‘sublime’ experience and myth of the suffering artist of the nineteenth century Romantics. In fact the life cast of William Blake from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge was a major influence. He was familiar with artists famous for exploratory self-portraiture from Rembrandt (*‘Self is like a Beckett version of Rembrandt’*, Quinn) to Van Gogh, from Ghiberti to Rodin. Quinn’s father was a physicist



James S. Deville, Head of William Blake, calcium-sulphate-plaster head incorporating a cast life mask of William Blake, depth: 26 cm, height: 29.5 cm, width: 17.3 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (M.7-1947)

and Quinn has acknowledged a debt to him. Quinn was also influenced by another Cambridge graduate, sculptor Antony Gormley, who had been making life casts since 1980, and had also made work in bread (see further reference below).

With the shock-value of his material, Quinn fitted right in with the Post-Modernism of the contemporary Young British Artists (YBAs) who had emerged out of Goldsmiths (now University of London) and hit the headlines with the 1988 Freeze show organised by Damien Hirst (with whom Quinn later shared a flat). These artists, including Emin and Lucas, who were finding new ways to express their identity, supported by the gallerist Jay Jopling, were Quinn's peer group in London. They lived a life fuelled by alcohol and Quinn was an alcoholic by the time he made *Self*. His first show was at Jopling's Otis Gallery in 1988, where he exhibited bread dough cast in bronze in 1990, and *Self* at the Grob Gallery, Soho in 1991. *"My life was extreme in the early 1990s, and I think it's obvious that a young artist will also look for an extreme statement to put himself on the map... Self is about the idea of dependence; just as the addict is dependent on his drug, so the blood head cannot survive without electricity"* (Quinn quoted by Will Self 2009). The collector and patron Charles Saatchi bought *Self* from Jopling for £13,000 and it went on show at his Boundary Road gallery in north London in 'Young Artists II'.

This was a boom period for the arts in Britain. Margaret Thatcher had encouraged entrepreneurship and business sponsorship of the arts in the 1980s and by 1991 art under PM John Major was seen as an investment. The YBAs received considerable media coverage for their youth, their lifestyle, and their early fame as much as their art. Yet this was also the era of AIDS so the medium of blood was viewed by some as an *'agent of death'*.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Quinn's radical choice of material never ceases to shock; however, the process of casting from life is traditional and requires great skill. He had been taught the technique when he was an assistant to



Flanagan in 1983. He took a very literal approach: *"It depends on my life to be created – it's made from the substance of me; and so I think of it as the purest form of sculpture – to sculpt your own body from your own body"* (Quinn). First he and his studio assistants made a life cast of his head in dental plaster – this was not ideal, so on the fourth attempt he added a silicone tegument (protective layer) to the mould to help the adherence. Clues to this process



can be seen in the stuffed nostrils, the pinned back ears and the closed eyes and asymmetrical features. A doctor took his blood monthly over a period of a year (he initially claimed 5 months) to a total of 9 pints (5 litres) – by chance the amount contained in the human body. He then filled his life cast with blood and froze it at minus 18 degrees C. It remains solid as it is kept on a refrigeration unit which also functions as a plinth.

Left Marc Quinn's *Self* on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition *Like Life: Sculpture, Color and The Body*, March 2018. Digital image courtesy of Marc Quinn. Photo: Marc Quinn studio

Right Marc Quinn's *Self* on view at the Saatchi Gallery, 2005. Digital image courtesy of Marc Quinn. Photo: Marc Quinn studio

Below Marc Quinn, *Marie Antoinette*, 1989, baked dough cast in bronze. Digital image courtesy of Marc Quinn. Photo: Marc Quinn studio

Traditionally blood is associated with both life and, often violent, death. In the Christian church red wine represents the blood of Christ in the Eucharist/Holy Communion/Mass and hence refers to life after death. Or as Will Self noted '*this Eucharistic formula: bread = body; alcohol = blood*'.

This sculpture is a record of life at a particular moment, but will also survive after Quinn's death as it is on a life-support machine – the refrigeration unit. Quinn was brought up as a Catholic by his French mother and had previously made busts out of bread dough (see *Marie Antoinette*, 1989, 124.5h x 40.6w x 30.5d cm). Blood transfusions renew life but the freezing process stopped time (and revealed tiny pin prick holes on the surface as the air escaped). As it has aged the iron content has changed the colour to a bronzer, darker stain rather like a patina or rust, such that many viewers read it as a dead decapitated head. The traditional process combined with the new material initiates a dialogue on mortality and immortality: '*Life is short but art is long*' (Quinn).



4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Quinn's work found peak critical success when it was exhibited together with other works from Saatchi's collection at the Royal Academy of Arts show 'Sensation' in 1997. The Labour Party had just returned to power and Tony Blair's 'Cool Britannia' was in full swing. The catalogue *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (1997) edited by Norman Rosenthal says: '*Inspired by a cast of William Blake's face, Self is a meditation on mortality, tenuously held in frozen animation.*' The work's links with the art historical past were outlined by Will Self: '*a relic, a disinterred thing, a mythic object*' and the future '*by virtue of life-support technology*'.

Anna Moszynska discussed the work in relation to Julia Kristeva's concept of the 'abject' body which 'refers to the feeling of repulsion and the sense of horror and vulnerability one feels when presented with blood...the abject, she suggests, is the space between subject and object, and is on the side of the feminine as opposed to the rule-bound order of the patriarchal.' Moszynska goes on to write this is 'highly resonant in a period dominated by awareness of AIDS...Originally exhibited with bread 'hands', which were tacked to the wall surrounding Self, the juxtaposition suggested the ritual of transubstantiation in which, during Mass, bread and wine are miraculously transformed into the body and blood of Christ' (p.26).

A sure sign of the work's notoriety with the general public was a newspaper story in 2002. It claimed *Self* had melted when builders unplugged the freezer in Saatchi's flat while refurbishing the kitchen for his wife, the chef Nigella Lawson!

In 2005 Saatchi sold *Self* for £1.5m to a dealer in the USA. However, Quinn continued to make casts every five years until 2011.



Marc Quinn, Casts of *Self*, 1996-2011. Digital images courtesy of Marc Quinn. Photo: Marc Quinn studio

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

- Moszynska, Anna *Sculpture Now* (2013) Thames & Hudson
- *Young British Artist II*, Saatchi Collection catalogue
- *Sensation* (1997) Royal Academy of Arts catalogue
- <http://marcquinn.com/artworks/single/self-1991>
- <http://marcquinn.com/studio/studio-diaries/the-making-of-self>
- <https://imagejournal.org/article/marc-quinn-matter-life-death/>
- <https://smarthistory.org/a-level-marc-quinn-self/>
- http://marcquinn.com/assets/downloads/Bring_me_the_Head_of_Marc_Quinn_Will_Self_FULL.pdf