



My cultural life

NICKY HASLAM

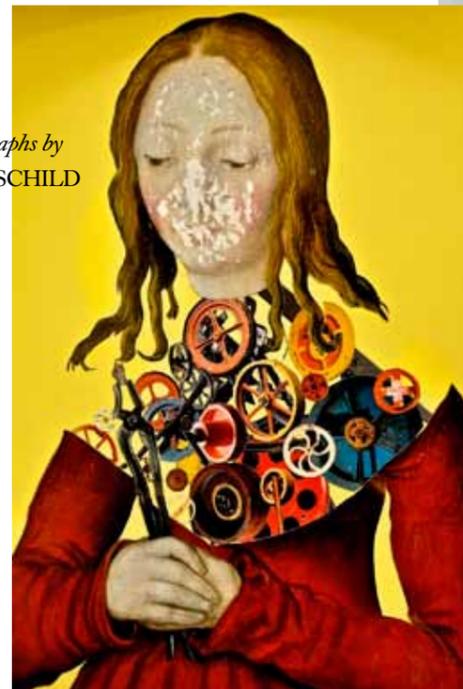
- First record bought** 'Marlene Dietrich's *At the Cafe de Paris.*'
- Book that changed your life** 'A Legacy by Sybille Bedford.'
- Recurring dream** 'In my last dream I was kissed by Dean Martin. I wish it *would* recur.'
- Most loved fairy tale** 'Edward Lear's cautionary tales are most instructive.'
- Favourite cliché** 'It's never too late.'
- Poem known by heart** 'Parts of "Atalanta in Calydon" by Swinburne.'
- Most overrated** 'Almost all modern American films.'
- Most underrated** 'Chrysanthemums, for their scent.'
- Would sing a duet with...** 'Oscar de la Renta. I would and I have.'
- Favourite film** 'The Damned by Visconti.'
- Book you would ban** 'Any on global warming.'
- Irrational fear of...** 'broken glass.'
- Would appoint as culture secretary** 'Rupert Everett.'
- Favourite destination** 'Wherever my lover is.'
- Signature dance** 'The Lafayette, a dance I invented in New York in the 1960s.'
- Brains or beauty** 'Must have both.'
- Dylan or Hendrix** 'Dylan. As interpreted by Bryan Ferry.'
- James Dean or James Stewart** 'Dean and that red windcheater.'
- Optimist or pessimist** 'Optimism doesn't bore others.'
- Most envious of** 'People who can count.'
- Most proud of** 'My godchildren.'
- Best piece of advice** "'Go. You can always leave": Diana Cooper.'

Nicky Haslam's interior-design book *'Folly de Grandeur'* (£40, Jacqui Small in the UK; Rizzoli worldwide) is available now.

Art
DREAM MACHINES

Michael Landy's new National Gallery installation reinterprets classic paintings of saints as gigantic, moving automatons

Words and photographs by HANNAH ROTHSCHILD



This May, visitors to London's National Gallery expecting quiet contemplation will be greeted instead by a cacophony of clanging machines made up of the whirling, spinning limbs of seven patron saints and the odd Catherine-wheel. The noise will emanate from an exhibition of work by Michael Landy, the gallery's latest associate artist, whose giant automatons are his response to the National's permanent collection.

Landy, a 49-year-old graduate of Goldsmith College, describes himself as a sculptor/conceptual artist. He is best known for *Break Down* (2001), a two-week stint in a disused C&A department store where he destroyed all of his worldly possessions, from his socks to a Saab car. In another controversial show, *Art Bin*, he invited people to contribute to 'a monument to creative failure' by throwing all their bad art into a vast plastic bin.

When I first visited Landy in 2011, shortly after he moved into the associate artists' studio behind Trafalgar Square, he looked slightly lost, an elfin figure in a stark white room lit by ugly neon strips. The only objects in the room were some preliminary sketches,

a desk, a chair and a fridge left by a former associate artist, Peter Blake. Landy admitted to having rarely set foot inside the gallery before. 'Coming here was like beginning all over again. I am not even a painter.' Now, two years on, the studio has been transformed into Landy-land: the floor is strewn with offcuts from drawings and photocopies; the walls are covered from floor to ceiling with works in progress; tables are piled high with pencils and aide-memoires.

The associate-artist scheme invites the selected person to study the collection for two years, and it is one way that the National Gallery interacts with contemporary artists. 'What matters is not just that we might actually influence the art of one living artist, but that we show the public how influential the [permanent collection] can be,' explains the director Nicholas Penny. Previous incumbents include Ron Mueck, Paula Rego, Ken Kiff and John Virtue.

With more than 2,300 paintings in the collection, dating from the 13th to the early 20th century, including landscapes and portraits, secular and religious subjects, Landy faced a potentially bewildering array of choice and inspiration to draw from. 'I really spent the first year just looking and thinking,' he says. Like many other artists, he learned most by copying Old Masters, making his first transcriptions from paintings by El Greco and Dosso Dossi.

Landy chose to concentrate on the lives of the saints, 'because you couldn't make them up! What a group of strange, single-minded people'. Among his favourites were St Catherine, who had her head chopped off and was carried by a thousand angels to heaven; St Jerome, an old man who befriended a lion and beat his chest to banish carnal thoughts; and St Benedict, who rolled in thorn-bushes in an attempt to quell sexual hallucinations. Landy, the son of Irish immigrant parents, was brought up a Catholic and made to study the scriptures at Sunday school. He admits this show is 'a revenge, a way of getting my own back on those lessons I had to sit through.'

I like the fact, too, that the saints have been forgotten about, so I am putting them back together again, like bits of junk, in a strange order.' So, inspired by the work of kinetic sculptor Jean Tinguely, who used scrap and machines to make animated sculptures, Landy (working with the model makers MDM Props) has created huge, interactive, disembodied figures for the National Gallery's Sunley Rooms. Doubting

Thomas beats his chest with massive thumps; St Francis pulls T-shirts out of a hole in his head, while Peter Martyr looks forlorn with a sword in his head and dagger in his chest.

This is not the first controversial exhibition of contemporary art at the National Gallery. Some were offended last year by Richard Hamilton's paintings showing a naked female Angel Gabriel and a seated Virgin Mary. 'Artists

should be the guardians of beauty, not purveyors of the voyeuristic,' declared a headline in *The Catholic Herald*. But Landy insists that he isn't seeking controversy: 'In the end, what I want is to entertain people. And that's what I am doing.'

'Michael Landy: Saints Alive' is at the National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London WC2 (020 7747 2885; www.nationalgallery.org.uk), from 23 May.



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