



Marc Quinn, *Iceberg Desk*. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

## 'It's not about freakiness, it's about humanity'

With sculptures of the 'pregnant man,' a woman with massive, surgically enhanced breasts, Michael Jackson and Pamela Anderson, what is Marc Quinn's latest exhibition all about?

BY SIMON HATTENSTON  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Marc Quinn stands proudly over his latest sculpture. It's brilliantly detailed, sensual and a little bit rude. A woman is having sex with a man from behind. At first sight, it's a simple conceit, a reversal of traditional gender roles. Only when you look underneath the bronze couple do you realize there's something more going on. The woman has a penis, the man a vagina.

Five years ago, Quinn made a series of sculptures of people with disabilities whose bodies defined them — most famously Alison Lapper, armless and with short legs, displayed on Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth in central London. Now he's made a new series featuring people who have defined their body, using plastic surgery and hormones, to turn it into something that reflects their inner self.

So, in the case of models Allannah Starr and Buck Angel, she was originally a he and he was originally a she, and to an extent he is still a he and she is still a she, and that's before we even consider the possibility of a third sex.

Quinn has always been fascinated by the human body and the dubious concept of normality. "The world is so weird that you don't have to make things up, you just find things." He discovered Buck Angel on the Internet by typing into the search engine the words "plastic surgery" and "transformation." Buck knew Quinn's work and loved the idea of posing for him. He told the artist about his friend Allannah, who had gone the other way and with whom he had made a film. The movie was a first in the pornography world.

Alongside Buck and Allannah are sculptures of the Catman, actor Pamela Anderson, Michael Jackson, Thomas Beatie (better known as the pregnant man) and adult "breast entertainer" Chelsea Charns. All rebuilt themselves in different ways. Beatie was born Tracy LaGondino and underwent a sexual reassignment procedure to become a man. But he kept his female reproductive organs and became pregnant in 2007 by artificial insemination. He is now expecting his third child. The huge white marble sculpture of him is astonishing: George Michael meets Michelangelo's *David*. The *David* reference is deliberate — it's not simply the scale, but the sense of innocence and purity. Which makes even weirder the fact that the bloke with the beard is pregnant. More than anything, it's Beatie's pants that make this such an intimate and human work — the creases, the pulls in the crotch, the way one leg rides up. "Sculpture's all about drapery, isn't it?" Quinn says. "Recreating the movement of fabric in marble is one of the classic sculptural themes." He looks up towards Beatie's pants as we speak. "What's interesting is that the scale puts us in a child-adult relationship to it. So it infantilizes us, the viewer."

Quinn established himself in Charles Saatchi's Sensation show with *Self*, a frozen bust of his head made from 5 liters of his own blood. It was grotesque and gorgeous and, as so often in his work, turned the world inside out. Like much of the art produced by his generation, it dealt with time and degeneration — keep it at the wrong temperature and it melts into its original form. His father was a scientist, and Quinn combined art and science to ask existential questions. What are we? What can we become? What is natural and unnatural? In a later project, he created a cryogenically frozen garden from flowers that in the natural world could never grow together.

One project tends to evolve into another. So the frozen garden led to his recent acid-trip garden paintings, and the sculptures of disabled people led to those we are looking at today. His

transsexuals also ask basic biological questions, he says. After all, every embryo starts out female. "It's the whack of testosterone that makes the clitoris turn into a penis. So that's the weird thing. We're like, 'How strange' but every boy's done it!"

Allannah Starr has arrived at the studio to see her sculpture for the first time. As we walk up from the basement, I ask Quinn if he has shown his two young children the sculptures. "No, I don't think it's a good idea for a bit..." He smiles. His 19-year-old daughter likes them. "See, 19-year-olds are more sophisticated than when we were 19," says Quinn, who is 46.

Starr is a formidable woman; elegant, sexy and smart. Only her lips look as if they've had too much work done. She is here with her tiny, elderly Cuban mother who lives in Miami. Starr talks in a sultry, singsong voice, while her mother smiles sweetly to compensate for her lack of English. First, they visit the sculpture of her and Buck naked holding hands. "Amaaaaazing," Starr says. "Oh my God, I didn't realize they'd be in bronze. Incredible." Then the four of us are face to face with the more explicit work. Starr's mother walks round, inspecting it closely. "It's so beautiful," she says gently.

"The genitals, are they there?" Starr asks Quinn. He nods. We get on our knees to look, diffidently feeling our way along the sculpture until we find an erect penis. "Oh yes! They are!" she shouts with delight. It's strange how close the world of high art can be to that of Eurotrash. "I like the idea that you have to lie on the floor to see them. Hopefully at the gallery people will be lying on the floor, too," Quinn says.

I ask Starr what her mum thought about the sex change. "Oh, my mother's really open-minded, really liberal." Did it cause any problems when she went into the pornography industry? She translates the question and answers for her mother, who smiles beatifically. "No, it's Allannah's life. She has to do what she wants."

Starr has incredible greeny-brown eyes. Are they natural? "Oh yes — that's the only thing left. Hahahaha!" She pauses. "Well, except the penis." Starr, 35, started cross-dressing in her late teens. She just didn't feel right as a man. She's had 55 operations, including six on her nose and six on her breasts. What are her plans for the future? "I'm just going to continue getting more surgery." She grins. Would she ever get rid of her penis? Quinn says she would lose her USP if she did, and she nods. But there are other considerations, aren't there, such as having a family? "I don't want children," she says. "Maybe when I'm older I will have it removed to normalize myself for old age."

Across the room are sculptures of Michael Jackson's head and hand. Jackson had agreed to model for Quinn, but died before he made it to the studio. The sculptures are based on paintings. Is the hand a separate sculpture because his glove became so iconic? Oh no, Quinn says, it's an allusion to the sculpted head and hand of Constantine the Great at Rome's Musei Capitolini. Quinn studied art history at Cambridge University. "I love ancient art. As an artist, I think you're influenced by absolutely everything you see. You just suck it all in, then out comes something else." What does come out is incredibly diverse. As we move towards the next new piece of work, we pass a sculpture of a prisoner being tortured at Abu Ghraib, part inspired by Goya's crucifixion, a contorted Kate Moss with her legs over her head, phallic, psychedelic flower gardens — "Drugs for people who don't take drugs, like myself, or porn pictures your mum can look at," Quinn says.

He shows me a painting of Buck Angel when he was a girl. She was broad-shouldered, big-boned and extremely pretty. Angel, who is in the Netherlands when I speak to him, laughs uneasily when I say the word pretty. "I guess you could say that — I don't really know. I modeled for a little while, but I wasn't your average fashion model, that's for sure. They had to pose me like a mannequin because I didn't have that femaleness about me. I just couldn't be comfortable in my body. I damped down those feelings by drinking a lot and doing drugs through my early teens. I always knew I wanted to be a guy." Did he think he'd do something about it? "No... Transgender is huge now, but when I was young, there was no knowledge of being able to have a sex change." He (as a she) had relationships with women but didn't identify as a

lesbian. He didn't really identify with anybody or anything. He was suicidal. "My parents just assumed I was a gay woman. They weren't happy with that because of the stigma of having a gay daughter."

Fifteen years ago, at 28, he had a sex change. He had only one operation — on his chest — and the rest was achieved through testosterone injections. How would he describe himself now? "A pretty buff, macho kind of guy," he says in a voice that is still a little high-pitched. When Angel changed sex, he lost most of his friends — mainly lesbians who regarded him as a gender traitor. All in all, though, he says, things couldn't be better. "I now love my life and love being in my body." His relationship with his parents is also different. "They treat me like their son. I have totally reconnected with my family." Why does he think that has happened? "Because I am happy with myself, and really that's all your parents want."

Sexuality is such a strange thing, he says. As a woman he was a confirmed lesbian. As a man, he now often sleeps with men. But that is largely in a professional capacity. "For business purposes, the majority of my customer base happens to be gay men, and they don't really want to see me with gay women." To complicate issues further, Buck is married to a woman, the tattoo artist Elayne Angel.

He says he's 100 percent comfortable with his body these days — if he weren't, he would not have allowed Quinn to sculpt him. Does he not want a proper penis (he has an embryonic one — the result of the testosterone)? No, that's the funny thing, he says, he'd always thought the point of a sex change was to own a penis, but over time he's come to regard male genitals as merely symbolic or cosmetic. "What's the point of having a penis that is not fully functioning and does not even really look like one? Also, there's a chance of losing your orgasms, and that was the deciding factor for me. For me, I am a man and that's what I'm trying to say to the world — my genitals do not define me."

The sculpture of Chelsea Charns is lifelike and disarmingly small. She is virtually all bosom. What interested Quinn was the fact that, apart from her breasts, she has had no plastic surgery. "With these absurdly huge breasts and a totally natural face, she is like a hallucination."

Chelsea Charns and Pamela Anderson seem to be cut from the same silicone-enhanced cloth. But for Quinn, the actor has rebuilt herself in a different way. While Charns has gone beyond the boundaries of convention, he says Anderson has adapted herself within social norms. "What Pamela has done is use surgery and transformation within the mainstream cultural context, whereas everyone else in the show has struck out on their own."

When I contact her to see what she thinks of the project, Anderson sends me an e-mail declaring her love for Quinn and his work. "I didn't even ask what he wanted to do with me. I would have done anything." What does she think of the final piece? "I like that it's raw. Not perfect. I think that's what makes it interesting."

Around the corner is a bust of the Catman, formerly known as Dennis Abner of San Diego, a man who went to extremes to express his inner feline. "He comes much more from the touring display tradition," Quinn says. "He works with *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* He's much more a performer and this has less to do with his sense of self. I think."

I'm staring at Chelsea Charns' breasts. It's hard not to. People are bound to call this project a freak show, aren't they? "It's not a freak show," he protests. He sounds upset. "That's what someone who's a complete idiot might think, but it's actually a very human show. It's not about freakiness, it's about humanity." I think it's about both.

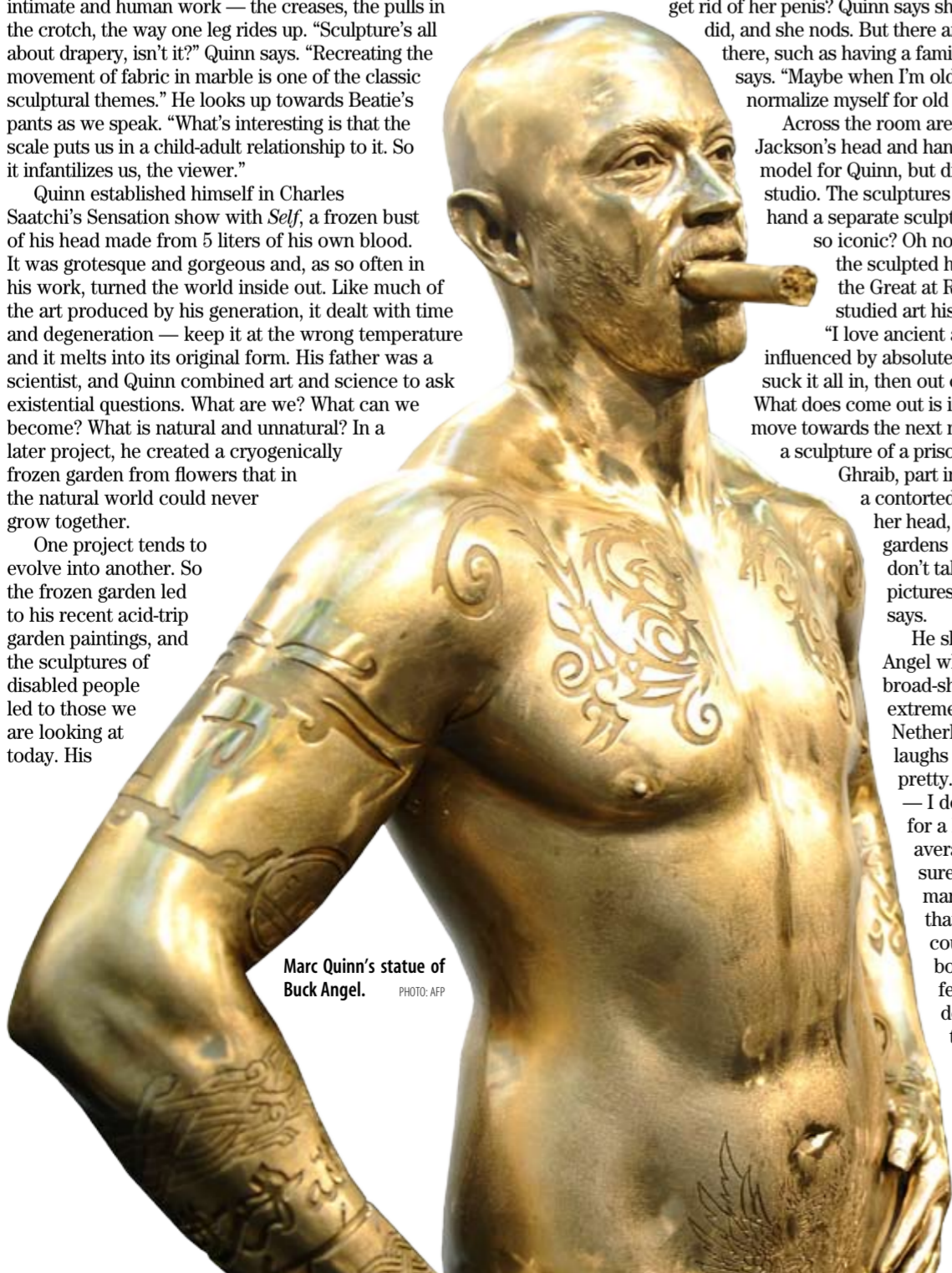
He knows he'll get those headlines, though, doesn't he? "I don't care. I think they are extremes of how people live now, and you look at those very tabloids that will say they are freaks, and this is the fodder of those papers."

We're sitting in the studio, drinking tea and talking acceptance. A few meters away is the painting of Buck Angel as the beautiful girl he once was. Angel had told me that the moment he realized his parents had finally embraced him was when he won transsexual performer of the year. "I rang up my dad and he said, 'Wow, that's great — I have a son who's a porn star!' And I thought, 'How could I ask for any more?'" Now, he says, he's moving away from pornography into education. "I'm speaking at universities. I really love doing my sex work, but it's kind of put a stop to people taking me seriously as an educationalist because people have such a weird thing about the sex industry and people who work in it, as if we don't have a voice that's capable of going beyond sex work."

Starr's mother says she is delighted Allannah has found herself. Occasionally, she is aware of people staring at her daughter as they walk down the street. It outrages her. Some people are so quick to judge. "So I just stare back at them," she says.

Michael Jackson, Pamela Anderson, Buck and Allannah, Thomas Beatie, Catman, Chelsea Charns — all of them are human works of art, Quinn says. Yes, he has made the works that will fill the gallery, but the originals were sculpted by themselves and their surgeons. "All art should be of the moment, with something eternal about it as well." He looks over at the sculptures. "I like the idea that if you left them in the desert and somebody found them in 5,000 years, it would probably tell them something about the society we live in now."

What would this show tell future generations? He smiles. "About the possibility of transformation. About how people could make their own worlds. Buck's genes say he should be a girl, but he's decided he doesn't want to be. It's culture triumphing over biology."



Marc Quinn's statue of Buck Angel. PHOTO: AFP

### EXHIBITIONS



Chen Qing, *Lone Wolf of the Underworld III* (1995). PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY

**Wildness and Purity (狂放與純粹)** is a retrospective exhibit of China-born Taiwanese ink painter Chen Qing's (陳勤) work. Early in life, Chen established a foundation in drawing and oil painting, which he would later use to create pen and ink paintings that see him blending the ideas of Western abstraction with the frenetic brushstrokes of Chinese cursive script. ■ National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2361-0270. General admission is NTS30 ■ Until May 23

**Perfection Serenity Substance Unrestraint** is a group exhibit by three of Taiwan's top sculptors, Chen Hsia-yu (陳夏雨), Hsiung Ping-ming (熊秉明) and Hsia Yan (夏蘭). Hsia Yan's recent metal sculptures of chaotic and bold lines display the dynamic movement of Futurism with an Eastern-infused narrative of nonchalant cuts and curves that works to soften the hardness of metal and reveal a transcendent grace. Using bronze as his primary medium, Hsiung's simple geometrical patterns attempt to capture a fleeting sense of time and space, while retaining elements of the eternal. This exhibit includes his well-known *Buffalo Series*. Chen's style merges elements of Egyptian, Greek and Buddhist art. Chosen on three occasions to participate in the Japanese Imperial Salon, his work in this exhibit illustrates a fascination with the female form. ■ Elite Gallery (誠品畫廊), 5F, 11 Songgao Rd, Taipei City (台北市松高路11號5F). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 8789-3388 X1588 ■ Until May 30

**The Wild Wonders of Hung Tung (洪通的異想幻境)** is a retrospective exhibit of Taiwanese artist Hung Tung's (洪通) paintings. Hung, a self-taught painter who began painting at the age of 50, was celebrated for his rich imagination and eccentric behavior. Although many critics dubbed his work childlike, Hung's paintings offer a vivid and intricate tapestry of colorful patterns full of figures and animals that were nurtured on Taiwanese folk traditions, particularly the popular religious traditions of temples. ■ Cultural Affairs Bureau of Taoyuan County Government (桃園縣政府文化局), 21 Sianfu Rd, Taoyuan County (桃園市縣府路21號) ■ Until May 25

Landscape painter Jan Chinshui (詹金水) returns to his abstract roots with **Looking at the Landscape (觀山水)**. Though having experimented stylistically, Jan produces vivid and appealing oil paintings in the spirit of Chinese landscapes. Deeply influenced by Tibet's landscapes, his paintings present shifting light, shadow, and mist in a naturalistic manner. According to the exhibition blurb, "Jan has developed a wonderful style that combines the textures and the rich, saturated colors of Western oils with the cultural and humanistic spirit of the East." ■ 99 Degrees Art Center (99 藝術中心), 5F, 259, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段259號5F). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 11am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2700-3099 ■ Until May 23

**Vision2: The Future that Encompasses the Past (遠瞻)** is a group exhibit and art exchange that features works by Taiwanese and Chinese painters, sculptors and installation artists in a dialogue that seeks to reveal the similarities and differences in the preoccupations of emerging and established artists on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. ■ Tina Keng Gallery (大未來畫廊), 15, Ln 548, Ruiguang Rd, Taipei City (台北市瑞光路548巷15號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2659-0798 ■ Until May 30