

Michael Landy – ‘Saints Alive’

‘An exciting blend of Renaissance and kinetic art’ - the last thing you would expect to find in the ever-traditional National Gallery; however, this exhibition is exactly that. Landy adopts a completely fresh approach to the representation of Saints, using larger than life mechanical figures and Frankenstein’s monster-esque creations to show the true brutality of martyrdom. Landy also provides drawings and paintings which hint at the style of Sutherland and show the initial designs in bizarre ‘Renaissance Saint Photomontages’, which are slightly reminiscent of Hannah Höch’s Dada work. However, as an artist who is not trained as a painter, Landy’s sketches and paintings still present a clear message, whilst still maintaining a primitive beauty.

In the ironically titled ‘Saints Alive’, Landy juxtaposes the past with the present, dignity with relentless suffering, and conveys epicurean values opposed to ascetic values. The man-made qualities of the machine-saints seem to remove the purpose of martyrdom in its respect to faith, and replaces it with human thought, and the feeling of pain not present in Landy’s Renaissance influences. The Saints are enduring absolute agony opposed to being glorious representations of Christian faith. However, this doesn’t change the effective impact Landy’s figures have upon their beholders. Foot-pump activated, these machines are large, awkward, industrial, yet brilliant. Revealing the interior mechanisms of the saints is initially fascinating. Cogs, wheels and pistons spin and rotate in a mesmerising sequence, which results in a largely primitive action of self-harm. It makes for great viewing, believe me. And I do not stand alone in this opinion. The public response to the works were just as positive; both young children and the more mature viewer took something away from the exhibition, and everyone wanted to stand on each foot-pump for themselves. Such a family-friendly exhibition, and crucially a contemporary exhibition, is a rarity in the National Gallery, an establishment more famed for its tradition rather than its support of YBAs (young British artists).

This exhibition is fearless in its lack of passiveness, despite being in the National Gallery. ‘Saints Alive’ provides an interaction with the art of both Landy, and of the art already present in the Gallery. It is precisely this interaction that makes this exhibition so successful and unique, providing both an interactive new show and a new perspective on the altarpieces and religious paintings in the already existing permanent collection. My personal favourite autobot ‘The Multi Saint’ is a monstrous hybrid creation, comprising of St. Peter the martyr’s head, St. Lawrence’s red-hot griddle, St. Lucy’s removed eyes on a dish, and St. Catherine’s wheel, all atop the Satan-crushing legs of St. Michael. It’s hard to picture, I’m sure. Many of these Saints are present in Carlo Crivelli’s altarpiece painted in 1476, with Hans Memling also inspiring the piece, of which both these Renaissance works are on display as part of the National Gallery’s existing collection. Landy’s work of art manages to be one of the weirdest constructions, yet one of the more well considered conceptions in contemporary mechanic sculpture. Landy doesn’t try to be too abstract, the work clearly makes sense, but he still leaves gaps for the mind to fill for itself. It conveys the real brutality of murder and torture in a realistic way: a realism Crivelli and Memling veer away from. When revisiting these Renaissance works, one is now forced to reconsider the use of a glorifying perspective of the figures, and instead look upon the characters with pity, wondering whether this is what the Martyrs died for. Is this gold and glory the real message of God and sacrifice?

In essence this free exhibition is more than worth a visit, and the queue of 2-3 minutes under represents the actual enjoyment anyone, even the most art-detesting children, can have.

Jack Snape