

# Reality Show

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Marc Quinn's latest series of sculpture-portraits, 'Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas', opens a provocative new chapter in the artist's already extensive exploration of the relationship between corporeality and spirituality. Intent on debunking the conceit that one's physical appearance necessarily represents an accurate or even appropriate incarnation of one's psyche, Quinn has continually sought out subjects who exemplify an obvious disconnect between body and inner being. For example, 'The Complete Marbles' (1999–2001) comprises gorgeous, life-size sculptures depicting men and women with limbs that are missing or truncated due to birth defect, accident or necessary medical amputation. In this series, Quinn highlights the fact that, although physical deformities are not a symptom of intellectual weakness, we often view and treat the handicapped as if they are mentally challenged. Exploring the reverse scenario in 'Chemical Life Support' (2005), the artist presents men and women whose bodies appear perfectly healthy, but who are actually dependent on a variety of drugs to keep them alive. Through both of these series, Quinn illustrates that a superficial examination of a person's body often belies a genuine understanding of their true identity.

On a more personal level, Quinn's legendary autogenous self-portrait *Self* (1991) – a life-size cast of the artist's head made from five litres of his own blood – is further testament to the challenges (both physical and conceptual) involved in attempting to manifest one's inner spirit in absolute and tangible terms. *Self*, in its awe-inspiring presence, must be kept in a special refrigerated chamber. Its serene gravitas contradicts its inherently fragile and unstable materialisation as it highlights the numerous (and problematic) equations between blood (body), self and soul.

In his latest sculpture series, Quinn approaches the multidimensional construct of personal identity from yet another angle, asking whether people are more or less themselves after undergoing elective cosmetic surgery. His models are seven real people who have significantly modified their own bodies in an attempt to

reconcile self-perceived inconsistencies between their inner beings and their natural external appearances. The unclassifiable, trans-corporeal experimentations of these seven subjects demonstrate an extreme experience of the body in constant flux. Quinn's subjects range from pop icons (Michael Jackson, Pamela Anderson), to tabloid favourites (Catman, Thomas Beatie a.k.a 'the pregnant man'), to niche-market porn stars (Buck Angel – a 'man with a pussy', as he is described on his official website; Allanah Starr, a self-proclaimed 'she-male'; and Chelsea Charms, whose breasts are purportedly the largest in the world). Collectively, this group has undergone incredible physical transformations by a diversity of means including: plastic surgery, hormone therapy, tattooing, piercing, skin bleaching, hair-dyeing, all varieties of implants and transplants, not to mention intensive work-out programmes. While these 'surgery junkies' may initially appear freakish, they are quite literally, through the very flesh and skin of their own bodies, acute embodiments of the universal – and distinctly human – desire to control one's own physical appearance in order to accurately project one's true inner self to the world.

Heroically and sensitively depicted in white marble, gleaming polished bronze and cast silver, Quinn's bodies-in-metamorphosis illustrate calculated physical mutations that have been aided and abetted by modern medicine, pharmacology and extreme body conditioning. One of the most striking subjects is Dennis Avner – or 'Catman', as he prefers to be called. Catman has undergone numerous cosmetic procedures in a quest to externalise his feline spirit. His body is covered with thick black tattooed stripes; his teeth have been capped and filed into veritable fangs; his upper lip has been surgically bifurcated and reshaped; his ears have been pinned back; and he has fibreglass whiskers permanently implanted in his face. Catman's hybrid visage is certainly startling to behold – and it appears especially striking re-created in flawless white marble with black marble inlay – but it is clear that Quinn intends to engage the viewer beyond the initial shock and awe. Like all effective portraits, these works encourage us to look beyond



**Catman Reversal (Purple)**

2010

Oil on canvas

41 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 31 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.

(106.4 x 79.1 cm)



below

**Buck Reversal (Blue)**

2010

Oil on canvas

37 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 53 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.

(95 x 135.2 cm)

bottom

**Buck as a Girl**

2010

Oil on canvas

35 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 27 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.

(91 x 69 cm)

opposite

**Buck and Allannah**

**Reversal (Blue)**

2010

Oil on canvas

52 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 35 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.

(133 x 91 cm)

superficial characteristics and speculate about the persona within. What is peculiar and especially intriguing about Quinn's models is that their bodies and/or faces are to a large extent self-made. Quinn sees them as 'artists who use their own bodies as their media', and because their physical features are the results of psychological compulsions, the resulting portraits are disarmingly personal.

One of the most captivating aspects of this series is its illustration of the remarkable breadth of options by which it is possible to adorn or reform the body as a means of self-expression, exposing both the diversity of body-related fantasies and the wide array of procedures now available to successfully evolve these from fantasy to reality. Quinn, however, reminds us that while many of the physiques he has chosen to depict are taboo, there are certain types of makeovers that are already socially acceptable. A case in point is Quinn's full-length portrait of Anderson, an early endorser of plastic surgery, whose public persona is inextricably linked to her breast implants. Thanks in part to publicity from celebrities like Anderson, breast augmentation is now one of the staples of elective cosmetic surgery and represents a formidable source of revenue for cosmetic surgeons (who are statistically the highest paid of all medical practitioners). Anderson provides a good entry point into Quinn's portrait series for two reasons: first of all, the notion of a woman undergoing surgery to increase her bust size is more congruent with normative physical ideals than, say, the desire to make oneself look like a cat or to change one's gender; secondly, her implants are really not all that shocking by today's standards. Considering Anderson alongside Quinn's portrait of adult entertainer Chelsea Charms, whose breasts are impossibly enormous (according to Charms's own website, each of her breasts weighs approximately 26 pounds), it becomes clear how quickly society has acclimatised to the practice of sculpting, molding and recasting the human body. Given the relatively short trajectory during which breast augmentation has gone from being unthinkable to being a routine operation (the first silicone breast implantation was performed in







1962), it seems safe to assume that at some point in the not too distant future, Charms’s body type – and by extension all of Quinn’s models’ physiques – will appear no more scandalous than Anderson’s does today.

Quinn’s masterful use of traditional materials such as marble and bronze offers affinities between his work and the finest examples of ancient Greek and Roman statuary. The Classical poses and life-size scale he favours, as well as the stylised anatomies of his models, are further indications of the artist’s interest in comparing Classical notions of perfection with contemporary realities. While these art-historical references contextualise Quinn’s sculptures, they also call attention to their powerful autonomy: whereas Classical representations of idealised physiques – enhanced musculature, exaggerated body parts, perfect symmetry – would have been unattainable by real men and women of that period, Quinn’s anatomical depictions are based on actual superhuman forms. Quinn cannot be accused of exaggerating Charms’s enormous breasts or Jackson’s sculpted nose in order to promote a physical ideal. Quite the contrary, these extreme features lie at the crossroads between individual fantasy and the fully realised potential for transforming one’s body.

The capacity to exert free will over one’s natural physique to the extent that it becomes a viable medium for creative expression is epitomised by Quinn’s colossal portrait head of Jackson (*Michael Jackson*, 2010). Perhaps the best-known celebrity ‘surgery junkie’, Jackson is depicted with one hand delicately brushing away hair from his iconic, mask-like visage. The gesture is familiar and quotidian, but it is also symbolic. Jackson’s delicate fingers grazing his wholly ‘unnatural’ face highlights his self-transformation/mutilation and, seen in the context of Quinn’s oeuvre, points to the autogenesis common to all of his models. In this respect, the portraits can be seen as referencing the work of 1960s and ’70s avant-garde ‘body artists’ such as Michel Journiac and Gina Pane, whose art consisted of self-inflicted mutilations or of subjecting their bodies to extreme physical trauma. In the same way,



‘Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas’ offers examples of contemporary ‘body art’ reframed within the context of Classical portrait sculpture. There is only one difference: Journiac and Pane were typically posing for groups of avant-garde aficionados – Quinn’s models are re-posing as their newly transformed selves in front of the world.

Although Quinn’s models are physically diverse – each one an emphatically unique self-creation – they are also all unambiguously human. Through gesture, posture and facial expression, the seven figures convey an empathetic combination of pride and self-consciousness. A good example is *Thomas Beatie* (2009), Quinn’s larger-than-life sculpture in white marble of the tabloid sensation who first gained attention in 2007 for becoming pregnant while undergoing female-to-male gender reassignment (Beatie is now expecting his – or is it her? – third child). Wearing only boxer shorts and standing in an elegant contrapposto pose, Beatie embraces his/her substantially swollen stomach with both hands, signalling that – perhaps even more so than the millions who gawked at the photos in *People* magazine or watched his/her appearance on the television chat show *Oprah* – s/he is utterly in awe of his/her own quasi-miraculous condition. Beatie’s cropped hair, prominent stubbly jaw line and manly chest stand in dramatically jarring contrast to his/her pregnant belly, and yet these ostensibly antithetical physical characteristics are integrated seamlessly by Quinn into a graceful form. Beatie’s serene facial expression and tender posture are, above all, unmistakeably maternal, and in this way Quinn’s portrait of Beatie manages to appear beautiful and regal, even while contradicting normative expectations.

The ‘gender-bender’ bodies observed and represented by Quinn (in addition to Beatie, there are the two transgender porn stars, Buck Angel and Allanah Starr) encourage a philosophical reassessment of how personal identity – our internal and external selves – can be honestly and adequately expressed. Given the numerous available means of transforming oneself, and given our capacity to defy traditional abstract notions of gender and sexuality,

below

**Thomas Reversal (Buff)**

2010

Oil on canvas

52 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 35 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.

(133 x 91 cm)

Quinn's presentation of atypical anatomies inevitably calls into question the validity of fixed, gender-based identification. Indeed the term 'gender' not only designates our sexual identity (ordinarily taken as immutable), but also refers to a fundamental grammatical rule by which we linguistically distinguish three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral. Several of Quinn's models challenge the inadequacies of such a rigid morphological system in relation to the ever-more complex and continuously fluid process of self-identification. How then can we best refer to Beatie, a perfectly convincing male – bearded and tall with chiselled pectoral muscles and beefy arms – who also happens to be pregnant? It is clearly not sufficient to use an epicene pronoun to refer to a human being: certainly Beatie, who is literally full of life and comfortable with his unique status, cannot be an 'it'. Therefore, what term can be used to designate Beatie, Angel and Starr? 'She-male', 'transsexual', 'transgender' – these words all have very specific connotations and describe particular anatomical combinations and psychological states that are not necessarily applicable to the unique situations of Angel, Beatie and Starr. In recent years, alternative pronouns such as 'ze' and 'zer'<sup>1</sup> have been proposed as replacements for the normative male/female linguistic construct, but these have not yet entered the mainstream. Regardless of how language develops in order to adequately characterise such a diversity of humanity, Quinn's work signals the urgent need to confront the current limitations of language with respect to the prescient political issues of human rights and self-expression.

Angel and Starr are both in transition – female-towards-male and male-towards-female respectively – and each possesses an odd combination of primary and secondary sex characteristics from both genders. Angel, who is bald-headed with a scruffy beard and moustache, has a brawny build, broad shoulders and a muscular chest; he/she also has a vagina. In one of Quinn's several portraits of Angel (*Buck with cigar*, 2010), his/her nude figure confronts the viewer unabashedly – hands on hips, one foot in front of the other, head cocked slightly, a fat cigar



sticking out of the side of his/her mouth – inviting a prolonged and contemplative gaze. We do not need Freud to tell us that the cigar Angel holds provocatively in his/her teeth is a surrogate penis, and the prop serves to further emphasise the difficulty in parsing his/her identity based on traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Angel's confidence and machismo are palpable from his/her authoritative stance and dogged facial expression – even though his/her relatively short height evokes a slightly vulnerable presence. Starr, on the other hand, is a buxom, full-lipped, feather-haired bombshell with a penis. In one sculpture (*Buck and Allannah*, 2010), based on a still from a porn film starring Angel and Starr, the couple is shown having sex – Angel down on all fours and Starr penetrating him/her from behind. In another double portrait (*Buck and Allannah*, 2010), the striking pair stands nude, side-by-side, feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped. Together, this heroic and empowered couple suggest a contemporised creation myth: a modern-day Adam and Eve story celebrating the loss of innocence as expressed through the radical options for self-expression in the 21st century.

To house his new Adam and Eve (and all of their kindred dysmorphic spirits) Quinn has created a contemporary Eden that is appropriately reliant on modern technology – an artificial environment that gives new meaning to the notion of 'the garden of earthly delights'. His new series of vibrant – almost hallucinogenic – paintings, 'In the Night Garden' (2010), depicts mixed arrangements of flowers that naturally would never be found in the same climate nor bloom during the same season. By placing tropical orchids next to country wildflowers, for example, Quinn emphasises how modern technology enables us to defy Mother Nature and create combinations according to our own aesthetic preferences. The highly mediated process by which Quinn makes his wholly synthetic works results in a wondrous supernatural setting wherein the sculpted marble and bronze figures appear very much at home. The juxtaposition of the floral paintings with the portrait-statues forces us to extend our appreciation of the contrived beauty of an

artificial floral combination to the 'bouquets' of atypical sex traits and other artificial physical characteristics embodied by the seven models. Quinn's utopian vision, in which flora and fauna are infinitely mutable and interchangeable, illustrates a thoroughly modern (or is it hyper-modern?) mythology wherein the human capacity to subvert nature is triumphant – a simultaneously empowering, beautiful and terrifying notion.

1. Creel, Richard, 'Ze, Zer, Mer', *American Philosophical Association Newsletters* (The American Philosophical Association 1997)