

# HANDS ON

Sculptor Lorenzo Quinn highlighted the threat of climate change on a monumental scale and now, for a new exhibition, he has created pieces that can be enjoyed in the home

By EMMA CRICHTON-MILLER / Photographer DIEGO MERINO

**G**reeting visitors in Venice last year was an unforgettable sight: two giant white arms with outspread, child-like fingers reaching out of the Grand Canal and appearing to prop up the historic Ca' Sagredo Hotel. Designed to coincide with the Venice Biennale, the dazzlingly white sculptures arose as if from the subconscious of this jewel-like watery city, to remind us of how time, pollution and rising seawater levels threaten its fragile fabric.

Aptly titled *Support*, it is just one of the latest monumental sculptures by Lorenzo Quinn, the Italian-American sculptor, whose highly-symbolic, figurative artworks are found in public spaces and private collections across the globe. The imposing hands are made from resin, but Quinn also works with cast metal – bronze, aluminium or steel – and, occasionally, marble. All his pieces share a desire to communicate urgent truths through the most enduring of motifs: the human body, or, as here and in many of his pieces, just the hands themselves. As the artist says, “The hand is a universal language.”

Based in Barcelona, Quinn's work has long been displayed at London's Halcyon Gallery, which opened a new temporary solo exhibition of his smaller, more intimate creations in Harrods in January (select limited-edition pieces will then be displayed in the store's permanent gallery). I meet the artist in the courtyard of his foundry in Valls, west of Barcelona, where these sculptures are making their way through the various processes of the ancient art. To the background din of hammering and welding, Quinn looks on in excitement as his ideas come to life.

His creations begin as Plasticine models, then exact wax replicas are created before the ceramic moulds are made, which produce the sculptures themselves. The most thrilling moment is when bronze, heated to 1,200 degrees, is poured like liquid sunlight into the ceramic moulds, hardening instantly. Even then, however, the work is not finished. Sections of large works are reassembled, the bronze pieces are “chased” and treated with chemicals to achieve the exact colour and finish Quinn is after, and then master polishers bring them to a gleam.

When he first arrived in Barcelona, 21 years ago, in search of sun and cheaper production costs, Quinn became one of many sculptors working with the skilled foundry workers of Valls. Today, he tells me, “This factory works 100 per cent for me.” More than 60 artisans are labouring at any one time on the entire array of Quinn's creations, producing editions, in scales from table-top to 10-metres high, of such famous pieces as Quinn's *Hand of God* sculpture or the Love Series, which features a circle or semi-circle of bronze with two hands touching in its centre.

As the son of the late actor Anthony Quinn, sculpture was not Quinn's first choice of career. Born in Rome, his childhood was split between the Italian capital and Los Angeles. He studied fine art in New York, determined to become a surrealist painter, having fallen in love with the work of Salvador Dalí as a child. Making the métier pay, however, proved more difficult, so Quinn embarked on an acting career, studying at the famous Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute, while simultaneously recording songs with ►

his band, which included a young Adam Sandler. He acted alongside his father in the 1988 film *Stradivari*, but it was the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to play the title role in *Dalí* that set his course. Much as he enjoyed impersonating his hero, he realised that in his own painting, “I was just doing a bad copy of something a genius had done before.” Moreover, as he admits candidly, “I realised that I was attracted to music and to acting for the wrong reasons – not because I loved the craft but because of what came with that – the popularity, the glamour.” Sculpting, meanwhile, which he was already tackling, “brought no glamour and it was very difficult”.

But then, his creativity caught fire: “I read a beautiful poem called *Footprints in the Sand*, which had this image of the hand of God, and I thought, I have got to make a sculpture about this.” He placed the text alongside the sculpture and people responded powerfully. Quinn comments: “In the end, life puts you in your place.”

His heroes are Michelangelo and Gian Lorenzo Bernini; the 19th-century French virtuoso Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux and the great master, Auguste Rodin. Quinn calls his own style of sculpture “symbolic realism”. He explains: “My sculptures carry a message. Each one has a purpose, to convey this message, whether it is about unity, family, decision-making, life or death. I need to know first what I want to talk about.” Once he has settled on a subject, he writes, and it is from the metaphors and adjectives in his writing that images arise. As he puts it: “The sculpture is the visual explanation of the text.”

Quinn shows me an enormous sculpture called *Moments* that takes up the full height of his second warehouse. It consists of a thick steel rope knotted at various points, with five human figures climbing upwards. Quinn explains: “The rope represents your life line. And climbing a rope is made easier with knots in it. It is also easier to climb your life if there are moments to cling onto – the moment you get married, the moment you fall in love, the moment your parents die – these are the knots that help you.”

Within the warehouse, another sculpture, *Reach*, is propped: a steel ladder with two bronze figures – a man at the bottom, holding the ladder, and a woman climbing to the very top. Quinn says, “I wanted to be



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**

Liquid metal is poured into a cast at the foundry in Spain; Lorenzo Quinn; *Support* reaches out from the Grand Canal, Venice; *Four Loves* was inspired by CS Lewis' book

a little provocative – unfortunately, in the world it is usually the other way round!” He then adds, shamefacedly, “My wife definitely holds my ladder. She has been holding my ladder for 30 years!”

The clearer and simpler the image, the better. “Communication is key,” Quinn explains. “That is why I make art. We all have the same basic concerns, all over the

world. We all want to feel loved, we want to love, we want to care for our loved ones. And then the rest starts – politics, then money – but if you don't have the basic things,

you can't be happy. I always appeal to that basic human factor.”

It was this immediate connection with his audience that Udi Sheleg, Chief Executive of Halcyon Gallery, recognised in Quinn's work when he first saw it in an exhibition in Barcelona in 1997: “It was a visceral impression that his work was universal, speaking directly to people's emotions. His work catches you at first glance. In the last four or five years, he has started looking outside the microcosms of the individual life and to global issues.”

*“My sculptures carry a message... about decision-making, family, life or death”*

Quinn's latest sculptures tackle climate change, pollution and war – and the question of what kind of world we are placing in the hands of our children. “These are scary times, and I want to stir people to action,” he says. Back in December, Halcyon unveiled the artist's latest outdoor sculpture, *A Dangerous Game* – a plea against the reckless use of intercontinental ballistic missiles – at the Wynwood Walls art centre in Miami.

At the same time as these grand statements, however, through his Artline collection for the home, Quinn wants to place art that has meaning within reach of private individuals, knowing that it is through the individual that the world is transformed. As Quinn tells me, he has very little secondary market – his art is not bought for investment, his buyers are keepers: “People buy it because it appeals to them,” he says. “It is their life message.” ■

**Available from Halcyon Gallery Pop-Up, Ground Floor, until 31st January; and Halcyon Gallery, Second Floor**