

A Campaign for Humanity: Lorenzo Quinn's Sculptures

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Every gesture counts when it comes to preserving and speaking up for our humanity. It is this philosophy that is at the heart of renowned Italian artist Lorenzo Quinn's practice, which is about spreading the message of love and faith around the world. His monumental sculptures, exhibited in public spaces across the globe, are iconic and highly symbolic. Each one of them confronts us with the realities of our society and campaigns for a better today and a more unified future. Characteristically representing hands, these emotive sculptures can suggest a call for solidarity, a push for generosity, or a plea to look after our planet.

Starting off as a painter inspired by Surrealist art, Quinn quickly moved to sculpture realising that he needed to work with another dimension. For the artist, **'with sculpture you feel like you're a creator; it's the closest a man can come to giving birth'**.¹ The hand of the artist or the sculptor is actively engaged; it becomes the bridge between creative imagination and the physical execution of an artwork. So it is not surprising that Quinn has become known for these expressive hand sculptures that have sprouted around the world. He seeks to make connections with the viewer, considering art a portal for communication and a conduit for our emotions and values. The human figure is the most recognisable form there is; it is our literal embodiment. **'I wanted to use the human figure so that people can connect with the artwork'**, he says; **'that's the main aim of my art. I want my art to be universal.'**

Quinn achieves the powerful expressiveness of his work through his artistic process: the sculpture begins with words and not with a visual image. It is first conceived as a piece of writing, a poetic text that suggests an emotion or a value that is then expressed and represented through an art form. The artist transitions from writing to making; he is both a writer and a craftsman, translating emotion from one language to another. This characteristic aspect accounts for the universality and accessible message that lies at the heart of his art: the exercise of translation facilitates communication with the best possible reach. In a sense, the process of making a single sculpture takes a lifetime; the artist often says in interviews that his last sculpture took 49 years or 35 years to make. That is because it takes all the tools acquired during one's lifetime to create a concise visual icon. It takes time to find the words, the colours, the forms, and the means of communicating those values and emotions that are representative of humanity and those that are able to transcend time and space.

¹ An interview with Lorenzo Quinn: <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/united-kingdom/articles/an-interview-with-lorenzo-quinn/> [last accessed: 28 May 2022]

Those that can essentially illustrate the legacy of our world. Once the idea is transposed into a physical sculpture, its meaning, the way in which it lives in the world and the way it can have an impact on our society and community are literally taken out of the hands of the artist: **'Public art belongs to the people; the sculptor doesn't exist once it's installed,'** Quinn says. We take it over as an offering that becomes ours to look after and whose message or call for action, whether one of love, solidarity, union, or peace, is ours to follow. In this sense, Quinn's body of work is essentially a campaign for humanity.

The hands are the part of the human body that is considered the most difficult to represent from a technical point of view. Although Quinn is interested in this challenge, he essentially focuses on hands because they speak a universal language and have the ability to communicate a wealth of emotions: **'In the hands lies so much power: to love, to hate, to create, to destroy'**, he has said. Hand gestures are more relatable than representations of a face, because it is easier to see oneself reflected in them. Hands have dominated our popular and art-historical culture, to which Quinn is clearly making reference. One of the most iconic depictions of hands is from Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where two hands almost touch each other. They are both in and out of reach and metaphorically represent the hand of the maker, God, with that of humanity, represented by Adam. While the monumentalism of Quinn's sculptures, and their separation from the public landscape and societal fabric gives them a surreal quality, their hyper-realism makes them reminiscent of Greco-Roman sculptures: their grand scale has a godly feel. They offer a wealth of symbolism that can be unraveled layer after layer, revealing a complex narrative of histories.

In a move to expand the symbolic scope of his work, Quinn's practice has evolved to include other forms alongside the hands, introducing circles and squares, as well as socio-political references. Installations such as *Home Sweet Home* (2009) tackle the issues of war, domestic abuse and sexual exploitation. *Statistics* (2008), a graph of death tolls with sculpted hands, illustrates the media's dehumanisation of the Iraq War. *This Is Not A Game* is a provocative anti-war installation that was presented as part of the Italian Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale. It includes giant hands playing with a life-sized tank and toy soldiers and features a 37-ton Russian T-55 tank. In these works, the active role that hands play in the installation is a reminder that we are at the source of the darkness in this world, that we literally had a hand in it. On a more optimistic note, in 2018, Quinn realised *Empowerment* for The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award, a sculpture that depicts the hands of a young man and woman holding the world, working together as a beacon of hope for future generations. For another philanthropic cause, the artist was commissioned to create *Give*

from the Heart (2018) by The Steve and Alexandra Cohen Foundation. The sculpture represents their commitment to inspiring philanthropy and giving back to the community.

Venice has become a platform and a showcase for the artist's work. Following *This Is Not A Game* in 2011, *Support* was installed in 2017 in the Grand Canal facing Ca' Sagredo, in the Cannaregio district of Venice, to coincide with the Venice Biennale. Two marble-white nine-metre tall children's hands surging up from the depths of the Grand Canal appeared to be bolstering the antique façade of the palace. This public work boldly engaged with the historical and ecological issues that confront the city today. *Support* calls attention to climate change and how the city of Venice is living with the constant threat of being engulfed by rising sea levels. Two years later, during the 2019 Venice Biennale, *Building Bridges* was erected in a basin adjacent to the entrance of the Arsenale, in the Castello District.

Composed of six pairs of monumental hands, individually titled 'Friendship', 'Faith', 'Help', 'Love', 'Hope' and 'Wisdom', the bridge continues to spread Quinn's message of world unity and forefronts Venice as a cultural meeting point. And now, a few short pandemic years later, Quinn reveals his latest creation: *Baby 3.0* to be inaugurated in the courtyard of Venice's municipality.

Baby 3.0 is the artist's latest artwork and is a symbol of the rebirth of humanity. Representing a fetus in the womb made of stainless steel wire mesh, complete with pelvic bones out of cast aluminum, the work is a turning point in the artist's career. Clearly alluding to the creation of life, it is not *just* a depiction of a baby, but a baby in the womb, who has not yet exited into the world. In other words, the pelvis is the cradle and the foundation for Quinn's symbolism. *Baby 3.0* takes us to our origins as a reminder that we all come from the same place, bringing us together in a unified collective. In the womb, we are all equal. The pelvis is an incredible, and the only, organ that has the capacity to expand and adapt in order to give life.

Paradoxically, and for the first time in his practice, the 8-metre sculpture is both monumental in its scale and intimate in its feeling. It invites us to enter into a cocoon, to interact, engage, touch the beginnings of life and to be confronted with its mysteries, and it draws us into the immensity of the questions at its heart and the essence of all that we do, of culture and science, philosophy and innovation: Why were we born? Why are we here? What is our purpose in life? With the title, the artist suggests a better and evolved humanity, a 3.0 version of ourselves, hinting at the advent of technological innovations, Quinn's artwork puts an emphasis on nature and reminds us that the work to be done starts within ourselves and for the generations to come.

As is characteristic of the artist's work, the symbolism in *Baby 3.0* operates on many levels and layers: opening a new chapter in Quinn's oeuvre with a new body of work, it is a symbol of the rebirth of the artist. It acts as an homage to women, and is launched in Venice – a place that is considered the cradle of art. More specifically, it is brought into the world in the Bacino di San Marco (the basin of San Marco) as a physical and metaphorical womb. From a birds' eye view, the grand canal resembles the umbilical cord that connects to the sculpture of the baby, adding to the levels of perspectives from which to perceive the work. The basin of San Marco is a connecting point for the city of Venice and is formed by four bones and the coccyx represented by land. A basin is also a reservoir, a recessed part that collects water – just as the womb of a mother-to-be fills with fluid – and for Venice, this is where life develops. Historically speaking, Venetians and the city of Venice have widely respected the basin for its water that connects to the rest of the city and that is fed from the Alps' forests. The Doges of Venice had in fact strict laws to protect the basin, which can be seen as a precursor to environmental awareness and movement. It is not by chance that Quinn wanted the sculpture to be *born* in this location.

The sculpture, named the Phoenix, is also a wink to the Teatro de la Fenice (Theatre of the Phoenix), an establishment in Venice that has burned to the ground twice and been rebuilt twice. It not only illustrates a rise from the ashes for the artist, but also campaigns for a rise from the ashes for our humanity. Furthermore, it is a reference to the Italian Renaissance, a period of paradigm shift in culture and society at large that is often described as a 'rebirth' of our thinking, of creation and our perception of the world. The Renaissance period started in the 14th century and spanned art, philosophy, literature, music, science, technology and culture at large, redefining European history. It was able to look at tradition in a transformative way by embedding within that knowledge a modern approach that was in sync with recent developments, from new techniques to transformed artistic sensibilities. In his practice, the artist continues in the footsteps of Renaissance Italian artists giving it a contemporary twist in an aesthetic language that is unique to Quinn.

Just as Renaissance art emerged as a distinct style in Italy, Lorenzo Quinn re-emerges with his own distinct style that takes us into the 22nd century. While the Renaissance period marked the transition in Europe from the Medieval period to the Early Modern age, Quinn's *Baby 3.0* is symptomatic of a society in transition, from our current contemporaneity to the 3.0 era. This era is marked by technological advancement and the emergence of tools such as Artificial Intelligence that mimic what makes our humanity distinct and unique: intelligence and emotion. Quinn's sculpture encompasses these paradoxes. On a technical level, he

makes use of modern tools to create his large-scale sculptures. He uses aluminum and steel to create life as well as to imitate it. On a conceptual and experiential level, he takes us to life's core to witness its beginnings. But the work's title is perhaps a word of warning that humanity could become automated and emotionless through technology. Would an AI live a better life than us? Will the AI become the student who surpasses its teacher, or can we still outsmart what we've created?

Baby 3.0 is a transformative artwork. It is not only a step forward for the artist's practice, but also a loop back: he started his career by depicting hands and now he's looking at the time when hands start taking shape in the womb. It points to a moment of transition, when humanity is at a crossroads. As we immerse ourselves within the sculpture, we are reminded that we are not one and alone, that humanity is bigger than us, and most importantly, that each one of us has a role to play in its future. Lorenzo Quinn is a messenger, and his art is a global campaign to protect the world in which we live.