

# Dulce et decorum est

Michael Sandle is the Wilfred Owen of art, with his deeply felt sense of the futility of violence. John McEwen traces the career of this extraordinary artist ahead of his 88th birthday



Left: Fierce power in every line: *St George and The Dragon in Dorset Rise, London EC4*. Right: The destruction of Sana'a, Yemen, in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. Facing page: *The International Memorial to Seafarers thrusts forward onto the Albert Embankment, SE1*

**M**ICHAEL SANDLE is a great man and a great artist with a conscience-stricken sense of outrage at the futility of violence, which gives an extra edge to his imaginative genius. The word 'genius' does not exactly spring to mind when viewing some of the recent trivialisations of sculpture in England, but, in Prof Sandle's case, I am deploying it with precision and from solid comparative evidence... '[his] drawings are among the most beautiful and haunting of the 20th century and have to be considered on equal terms with the sculpture.'

This tribute to the monumental sculptor could not be more authoritative. Bryan Robertson (1925–2002), as post-war director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, was the most artistically influential British curator of his time. This emerges clearly from a new book to which I have contributed the foreword, *Michael Sandle: Works on Paper*. It was published ahead of the artist's 88th birthday on May 18—through the initiative of writer and curator Jon Wood, formerly of the Henry Moore Institute, and with support from the Isle of Man Arts Council—and comes 22 years after my own *The Sculpture of Michael*

*Sandle*. Mr Wood devotes the book, adeptly designed by Peter McGrath, to 250 drawings, watercolours and prints, with explanatory captions by the sculptor.

‘Art for Michael Sandle is a never-ending, tortuous quest to “get it right”’

At the outset of his career, Prof Sandle vowed to try to make at least one monumental masterpiece every decade. Described by art historian Marco Livingstone as a 'radical traditionalist', he has fulfilled his ambition, despite the efforts of commissioning committees—a task he has called 'like climbing Everest on a pogo stick'. He is famed abroad to an exceptional extent for an English artist and has spent a fair part of his career overseas, especially in Germany, where he was successively professor of sculpture at two of the nation's foremost 'art schools', Pforzheim and Karlsruhe. His greatest work is the Malta Siege Bell Memorial, 1992 (Grand Harbour,

Valletta), a project, with regard to 'pogo sticks', that was estimated at £30,000 and cost about £4 million. Thanks to the selection committee, which included Lord Lewin, Admiral of the Fleet and the Duke of Edinburgh, who 'correctly disapproved' of the initial 'outdated "modernist" bunker', it was replaced by a classical bell tower—'after endless drawings and models until "I got it right"', Prof Sandle recalls—with the required grandeur achieved. The bell, which tolls each midday (John Donne's *No man is an island*), is a replica of Erfurt Cathedral's Maria Gloriosa, the most famous bell in Christendom. At the opening, Prof Sandle broke convention by asking Prince Philip if he liked it. There was a pause and then, with an amused smile, the Duke replied: 'Yes.'

It seems prophetic that our finest contemporary artist of war should be baptised on the aircraft carrier *HMS Ark Royal*, his father being in the Royal Navy. Aged four, he experienced the blitz of Plymouth in Devon. His first drawing, a burning tank with Spitfires and Messerschmitts overhead, brought a scolding from his infant-school teacher. In 1942, his father's naval posting moved the family to the Isle of Man and he is proud to be →



# Artist of the week



**Beauty in horror: *From the Sky*, 2017, portrays an F-16 supersonic multi-role fighter jet**

considered a Manxman. Self-governing Man suits his outsider nature. Its mountains, sea and dramatic light inspire the monumental and heroic, from the world's largest waterwheel at Laxey to the death-defying annual Tourist Trophy motorbike races. His ink-and-wash drawing *Sculptural Rock Formations on the Isle of Man*, 2021, is the imprinted cover of the new book.

Douglas Sandle remembers his elder brother's early 'fascination with death' and how his art remains a way of 'acknowledging' and 'transcending' it. For such a driven artist, who prefers to work by night, there is a psychological aspect. He recognises war and natural violence—the latter exemplified by a thunderous series of watercolours on the eruption of Mount St Helens, 1982—as a metaphor of artistic and personal struggle. Art for Prof Sandle is a never-ending, tortuous quest to 'get it right': 'Revision is important, as Michelangelo pointed out. *Pentimenti* [revisions]—it's absolutely true. If you're a real artist, that's what you do; otherwise you get somebody else to do it' or 'you become a concept artist'. As he sees it, even a study for a sculpture is drawn 'for its own sake'.

He lived on Man until called up for National Service, when he joined the Royal Artillery—the regiment of one of his artistic heroes, Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957). Weaponry has always captivated him; at 12, he astonished his teachers with the drawing of a Bofors anti-aircraft gun. His commanding officer, Maj H. C. Chambers, appointed him battery artist. His first exhibition—in the armoury, Colchester barracks in Essex—earned him entry to the Slade School of Art. He believes

he was a born draughtsman. 'You can only draw if you can see shape,' he mentions in Mr Wood's book. 'Seeing shape is very difficult, but you can teach people to do it... I couldn't do the sculpture I do if I couldn't draw.' At a Karlsruhe staff meeting, Baselitz, Lüpertz and other contemporary stars of the German art firmament told him: 'You're the only one here who can draw, you ought to teach life drawing'—so he did.

Two of his fiercest sculptures (1988) lack drawings for inclusion in the book: *A Mighty Blow for Freedom/Fuck the Media*, inspired by smashing his offending television set with a sledgehammer; and one of his two public sculptures in London, *St George and the Dragon* (2, Dorset Rise, Blackfriars, EC4). There are, however, studies for two other London masterpieces: *A Twentieth Century Memorial*, 1977 (Tate), excoriating the Vietnam War, and *The International Memorial to Seafarers*, 2001 (International Maritime Organisation, 4, Albert Embankment, SE1): the prow with its seaman, proud of the entrance, is in dramatic contrast to the dynamic abstraction of its interior, in the lobby. Prof Sandle treasures his teenage pencil drawing of a life-class model, the antithesis of the 'set-piece' bravura of the ink drawings ('I adore ink'), which have adorned recent Royal Academy Summer Exhibitions, such as *From the Sky*, 2017, an F-16 supersonic multi-role fighter jet. His 'outrage' at this most awesomely destructive of all eras, is, as Sir Alan Moses declared at the launch of *Michael Sandle, Works on Paper*, a passionate defence of 'life'.  *'Michael Sandle: Works on Paper' is published by Sansom & Company (£40)*

## Life of a genius

**1936** Born in Weymouth, Dorset

**1940** Witnesses the Plymouth blitz

**1942** Moves to the Isle of Man

**1951–54** Attends the Douglas School of Art and Technology. Draws inspiration from the island's leading contemporary artist, Bryan Kneale (b. 1930), today a fellow Royal Academician

**1954–56** National Service in the Royal Artillery

**1956–59** Attends the Slade School of Art in London

**1960** Works as a lithographer at Atelier Patris, Paris, France

**1961–69** Becomes an art-school lecturer at Leicester, Nottingham, Coventry and Stourbridge

**1970–71** Visiting associate professor Fine Art at Calgary and Victoria Universities in Canada

**1973–80** Lecturer, then professor in Sculpture, University of Applied Sciences for Design, Pforzheim, West Germany

**1980–99** Professor of Sculpture, Academy of Fine Arts, Karlsruhe, Germany

**1986** Wins the Nobutaka Shikanai Prize, 1st Rodin Grand Prize Exhibition at the Utsukushi-ga-Hara Open-Air Museum, Japan

**1990** Elected Royal Academician

**1995** Wins the Henry Hering Memorial Medal (for the Malta Siege Bell Memorial, *below*), National Sculpture Society of America

**1997** Resigns from the Royal Academy (RA) over its 'ducking and weaving' about the Myra Hindley portrait in the 'Sensation' exhibition

**2004** Rejoins the RA

**2021** Becomes patron of the Public Statues and Sculpture Association

**2017 and 2022** His memorials are featured on Maltese and Manx and postage stamps

