

What first sparked your idea to create a skull from cocaine – any particular observation or personal experience?

I honestly can't remember what initially sparked the idea but as in most of my work the subject is human behaviour. It's all around us, enigmatic and ever changing. To me, human behaviour seems to be the result of the conflict and cooperation of two dynamic forces within us: the vestigial animal instincts, without which we wouldn't have survived our dangerous past, and our need to live a communal lifestyle set in 'civilized' societies. These two forces are mutually opposed.

Essentially, we cannot live together and we cannot live apart. The point where these opposing forces meet is the point from which our true 'human' energy emerges. 'Ecce Animal' attempts to crystallize this evolutionary fault line, and in some way communicate the energy generated by this collision.

Was 'Ecce Animal' inspired by any former representations of skulls in art? (e.g. Damien Hirst's 'For The Love of God', Andy Warhol's 'Skulls', Van Gogh's 'Skull With a Burning Cigarette' or Yorick's skull in Hamlet)

Not consciously, at least. I start with an idea, not an image. In this case, my idea revolved around the tension between our 'human' side and our animal side. For me, the skull seemed to encapsulate both sides of the argument in a single image. It is 'human', of course, but at the same time, clearly visible evidence of our animal side.

Certainly, mortality and our own ability to understand our ultimate death in a removed, intellectual way, I believe, is one of the key behaviours that separate us from the animals. How we manage to live productive lives, while contemplating and anticipating our own death all the time, is one of the questions I think this piece aims to depict.

We know we will die, but we must continue to live until then; to do that, we need to convince ourselves that we, as humans, are in some way more than mere animals.

If not, what's the point?

Who of your contemporaries most influences your work and where does your main inspiration come from?

I don't really follow any particular artist or movement. I try not to be influenced by agendas or politics, although that can be quite challenging. I can be inspired by crises and conflict. It's where human behaviour comes to the surface in the most interesting ways. I'm particularly interested in behaviour that seems irrational or antiquated. The world is fixated on 'what we do'. But to me, 'why we do', is much more interesting. Beyond that I find it truly fascinating to examine the space between what we choose to think for ourselves, and what we allow others to think for us.

Take, for example, our oxymoronic relationship with the Military Industrial and Information complex. We want peace and freedom, yet we permit ourselves to fund and indirectly support institutions that can often produce the opposite. I feel these dynamics are really worth investigating. Not blind reactionary commentary, but honest, unbiased inquiry.

You have written a short poem to accompany the artwork, offering several possible interpretations of it. Do you think art should be explained by the artist rather than being left solely to individual interpretation?

I think it's personal to the artist and depends on how he/she wants to communicate with the viewer. For me, the object itself is never the whole 'piece'. I'm not trying to communicate a single idea, or induce a specific way of thinking. What I hope to accomplish with an artist statement is to provide people a bit of focus and define an 'arena for thought'. This arena offers people a way to explore and reflect on their own ideas and opinions. So the object is intended to be an icon, which creates the arena. The statement is the passageway. I want viewers to become part of the work, be drawn into the thinking, and hopefully uncover their own truly considered opinion.

Did you intend to highlight the pitfalls of modern society, in particular problems with substance addiction and hedonism?

No, Ecce Animal is not intended to be parable on the self-destructiveness of addiction or substance abuse. Instead, it's the focal point for a thought process. I don't want to over-intellectualize, but it's the fusion of two icons that hopefully provokes thought and discussion on the nature of man. Specifically, about his creation of, and participation in, a society which reflects his own tendency to lose control.

We have 'temporarily' outgrown the intended uses for our animal instincts. This leaves us in an uncomfortable conundrum. Where can we safely store them until we need them again?

Is there not a concern that art made out of cocaine could glamorise drug-taking?

Am I concerned regarding the choice of medium for this art piece? Well, on one hand I personally don't feel obliged to educate people on the potential dangers of drugs. In Ecce Animal, the cocaine is used in combination with a symbol of mortality, and therefore, quite directly relates to danger. Of course, the medium certainly has a glamour factor that can be useful in spreading the message.

The main reason I used cocaine, however, is because it compliments the intended message. Cocaine helps relieve the tension between the conflicting forces within us by activating areas deep in the brain that reward us for ‘good behaviours’, such as those associated with food, sex and healthy pleasure. In practice, the use of cocaine is prevalent across all socioeconomic strata, so in that sense it’s also representative and democratic.

All in all, I think using an explicit medium and message is justified when it facilitates a genuinely interesting or relevant thought process. Otherwise it’s superficial glamour.

What is the central message you want people to take from your art?

The messages differs from piece to piece, however, in recent work I highlight the idea that we are subject to forces, which continuously bombard us with propaganda designed to influence the way we think and how we behave. Each of my pieces is a ‘thinking process in progress.’ Essentially, each piece embodies the exploration of these propagandistic narratives and the truth they may obscure.

My central message is simple: “question everything” and “think for yourself ”. It sounds contradictory, but my work embodies my thinking, not my personal agenda. I’m not trying to make people agree with me, but if they do, hopefully it is after considered thought of their own.

Are you working on any new project?

Yes, my next project focuses on Power Intoxication. Excessive appetite for power poisons the personality, and allows us to do unacceptable harm to others. Again, it highlights the imbalance in equilibrium between our inner animal and society.

George Orwell said it beautifully: “Always, there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever.”