

# In Conversation with Michael Sandle

Alexander (Sami) Kardos-Nyheim

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*Michael Sandle RA is a sculptor and one of Britain's foremost living artists. He is an outspoken critic of many facets of today's art world, and has ruffled feathers in Downing Street and Buckingham Palace. He left the Royal Academy of Arts in protest in 1997, but was called back and has been referred to as 'the living soul of the RA'. His artistic focus is on war, death, and destruction.*

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Fig 1. Belgrano Medal—A Medal of Dishonour (Michael Sandle 1986). Courtesy of Michael Sandle.

**CJLPA: Your family home was bombed during the Second World War. Do you have any recollections of this? Has this incident affected you throughout your childhood and has it found its way into your work?**

**Michael Sandle:** I remember very clearly the Second World War blitz on Plymouth when I was aged four to five years old. I wasn't frightened or suffering any hardship and never saw a dead body, but I remember picking up my mother's panic as we ran to the shelters. One was an Anderson shelter in a neighbour's back yard and the other one was a large concrete one not far up the hill from Warleigh Avenue, where we lived. My mother claimed that we

were machine-gunned as we were running to the larger one up the hill—could be embroidery on her part, although there was a row of holes in the zinc coal bin and shrapnel in our backyard. The thing that sticks in my memory the most is that after we had moved to the comparative safety of Bodmin (because my mother decided it was time to get out of Plymouth—she was right as our house got bombed) is that she had occasion to go back to Plymouth by train and she took me with her (I'd say this was sometime in 1942). As the train came into Plymouth station my mother pointed through the carriage window and said, 'Look, Michael—that is where we used to live.' There was hardly a building left standing and I have never ever forgotten this scene of devastation. I am convinced that these

memories are behind my interest in war as a theme and my interest in aerial warfare in particular. However, as the reverberations from the First World War are still being felt as it was the beginning of slaughter on an industrial scale, and the fact that the Second World War brought about increased scientific and technical advance which has changed the lives of so many people, you would have to be rather dim not to recognise war's importance and its obscurity.

**CJLPA: War and destruction form a recurring theme of your work. I am intrigued by your design of the *Belgrano Medal* from 1986, showing Margaret Thatcher with the inscription 'imperatrix impudens', which translates as 'shameless empress'. The medal shows the Argentine Navy cruiser *Belgrano* as it sunk, having been hit by a Royal Navy submarine *HMS Conqueror* in the Falklands War, with the loss of 323 lives. Who commissioned the medal and for what purpose?**

**MS:** The *Belgrano Medal*, or 'Medal of Dishonour', was influenced by the superb German medallists of the First World War, such as Karl Goetz, in the British Museum. I saw an exhibition of these biting and extremely powerful medals and decided to try and do one myself. I then decided it would be a medal of dishonour. I did not know at the time that the American sculptor David Smith had also seen much earlier these very same German medals in the British Museum too and had decided to make some medals himself, which he also called *Medals for Dishonor*. They did not go down too well in America. For my medal, which had been commissioned on behalf of BAMS [the British Art Medal Society] by the then-Curator of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, Mark Jones (he said I could do whatever subject I liked) I decided on the sinking of the *Belgrano*, which seemed dishonourable to me—Margaret Thatcher with her arrogance was like a red rag to a bull to someone like me. There were questions raised about this medal, and Mark Jones could have been in a lot of trouble. However, he went on to be the Director of the V&A and is now Sir Mark Jones. Incidentally, a counter-medal was made against mine by a proponent of the Falklands War.

**CJLPA: I love your 1999 proposal for the 'Animals in War' memorial, which sadly was not chosen as the final memorial for the location in Park Lane, London. It would have been a powerful public monument. Has it since been built in another location, or would you still go ahead with it in another location if the opportunity should arise?**

**MS:** I put my heart and soul into the 'Animals in War' proposal but, like many competitions in Britain, I thought it was 'stitched up'. The organisers appeared to have decided that David Backhouse was going to win as he was allowed to re-submit, which is normally unheard of, after seeing my proposal, which had a mule carrying a screw-gun going up some steps (I always do a lot of research)—so what does the Animals in War Memorial have but a mule going up steps with a screw-gun on its back! I have been shafted on two other occasions, I might add. In Germany you are not allowed to put your name on anything submitted, in order to limit favouritism, and the submissions are judged purely on merit. If another city or country even wanted to have my proposal realised, I would of course be delighted.

**CJLPA: I remember when I first saw your sculpture at the Royal Academy Summer Show, titled *Iraq—the Sound of Your Silence* (2009, carved limewood), a Madonna-like mother holding a bandaged baby with a bag over her head. It was like nothing I had seen before. Can you talk a little about this incredibly powerful work?**

**MS:** *Iraq—the Sound of your Silence* is only the second wood carving I have ever attempted. The first was as a 16-year-old studying at the Douglas School of Art on the Isle of Man. It was a small relief in elm wood and the subject was Pegasus. I wanted to do a more ambitious carving in limewood because I came to admire the German medieval masters when I was living and working in Germany. The subject—a mother holding a bandaged, wounded child—came from an image I saw on the internet which jumped out at me, and I had previously drawn the *Iraq Triptych*, pillorying Blair, which had on the right-hand panel a drawing of the British soldier Corporal Payne beating hooded detainees, whom he called his 'choir' because of their cries and to amuse his mates. He beat one of his victims to death. Anyway, in my *Iraq* sculpture, I deliberately gave it a resonance with a pieta as I find organised Christianity staggeringly hypocritical—as I do most politics, particularly when it comes to foreign policy.

This sculpture was one of the most taxing works I have ever attempted; it took ages to do. Originally, it was going to be something quite different when I started it in Germany, many years before the invasion of Iraq, as it was going to be another work based on Kali, the Hindu goddess of love and revenge. However, I left Germany, brought it to my studio in Devon, divorced my wife, and moved the unfinished mass of wood to my London studio. After seeing photos of the horror unleashed in Iraq, it suddenly became crystal clear what I had to sculpt, and Kali was no longer my subject. I had already made a sculpture related to her anyway, called the *Queen of the Night*.

**CJLPA: Regarding art and social media, the huge number of artworks out there, what can one make out of that? The world of art has changed enormously since you taught at Karlsruhe (1980–99). What do you make of the chaos and speed with which the art world is moving, and its identity with the market? When art schools now take their references from the market, is there hope that we'll ever come out of this?**

**MS:** When I started off my career as an artist there weren't as many artists or galleries—Winston Churchill might well have said, 'Never in the history of mankind has so little art been made by so many!' I was once asked by a journalist from *The Times* for a quote about the work of the German artist Thomas Schütte, which was on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square at the time. I replied with, 'It would look better outside of Specsavers', which was duly printed. I got a wonderful email from an artist from 'up north' who said, 'Thank God for you, Mike, standing up for us mortals against the blizzard of shite masquerading as art'—blizzard of shite indeed! Anyway, what I loathe about the present-day art world is how the artists I grew up with have been totally forgotten. Who talks of Frank Brangwyn or of Dame Laura Knight or of Muirhead Bone, for example? They could all draw. Terry Atkinson, who was a colleague of mine, said some time ago (but it is still relevant), 'What matters today is how well you draw badly.'

It is not all doom and gloom—there are some real artists around, who are not part of the mainstream but don't get much notice from the media because they are only interested in 'celebrity' artists who have come to the fore by the machinery of the taste-makers who decide what is in—not unlike a form of cultural Stalinism, where the rules are arbitrary but absolute. I am a dyed-in-the-wool pessimist and I think the West is decadent. As Gore Vidal opined, we are living through the decline of the American Empire. With advancing age, I seem to have developed the mindset of a taxi driver when I look at a lot of contemporary art—'Do you call this rubbish art?' I think to myself, 'My two-year-old daughter could do better.' There are, though, two artists who have my greatest respect. They are Giles Walker, who is a brilliant animatronic sculptor and a scathing critic

of post-Brexit, post-Thatcherite Britain; and Tim Shaw, who is an equally scathing commentator on the dystopian society we live in.

**CJLPA: You were obsessed with the fear of death as a child. How does memory play into your work?**

**MS:** My work is all about memory—in a nutshell it is about sex and death. It is true, too, that I was very obsessed with death as a child.

**CJLPA: You call yourself a pessimist, distraught over the state of the world, yet you have a happy disposition. Is that because in spite of the way things are going in the world, you find yourself to be happy to be alive and in the company of people?**

**MS:** I have already said I am a pessimist, but I do love my friends and would not want to be a hermit. I am very lucky with friends—the only downside is that as you get older you lose them through death, but I have a lot of younger friends too.

**CJLPA: Are you a Romantic?**

**MS:** Am I a Romantic? I suppose so but maybe I am too conflicted to be one—I am pathologically lazy most of the time and ridiculously neurotic. I think real Romantics would have to be surer about themselves.

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Alexander (Sami) Kardos-Nyheim is a third-year undergraduate in Law at Trinity College, Cambridge. He is the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *CJLPA*. He has played an important role in efforts across London and Cambridge to protect communities and heritage assets from luxury redevelopment projects.

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Fig 2. *Animals in War* (Michael Sande 2000, maquette wood and epoxy, 75 x 75 x 75cm). Courtesy of Michael Sande.



Fig 3. Iraq—The Sound of your Silence (Michael Sandle 2009, limewood, 180 x 140 x 90cm). Courtesy of Michael Sandle.