



From left: Tim Shaw RA with *Man on Fire*, before its casting in 2023; the work draws partly on news images of British soldiers in flames after their vehicle was petrol bombed, in Basra on 19 September 2005, during the Iraq War

Backstory

A sculptor reflects on war

Twenty years on from the Iraq War, *Tim Shaw RA* tells *Elizabeth Fullerton* about his new public monument reminding us of the horrors of conflict

What does it mean to encapsulate the horror of conflict in a three-dimensional object? Images of the 'Napalm Girl' in the Vietnam War, the hooded Iraqi prisoner at Abu Ghraib, people jumping from the burning World Trade Centre have been etched in the public consciousness as evidence of humanity's barbarity, but how can one translate to sculpture photography's capacity to freeze-frame such moments?

Belfast-born artist Tim Shaw RA has wrestled intensively with these questions in his potent sculptures addressing human conflict. He has spent the past couple of years creating a new version of his sculpture *Man on Fire* (2007-23; above) as a permanent monument for the front entrance of the Imperial War Museum North in Salford. 'It bears witness to the terror of war,' says Shaw, when we meet at the RA. The sculpture is to be unveiled this spring to mark the 20th anniversary of the Iraq War.

Man on Fire is not intended for easy viewing. Despite the title's emphasis on 'man', the blaze which engulfs the figure dominates, almost eclipsing the human form. Nearly five metres tall, four metres long and two-and-a-half wide in black patinated bronze, the sculpture embodies panic; the searing heat of burning flesh as the figure lurches blindly forward, fighting to survive, flames fanning

out in all directions. As if trying to flee a monstrous beast crouched on his back, the man reaches out clawed hands in vain for help, legs propelling him forward, his head bent under the heat of the fire, face contorted in a scream. Shaw's figure is caught in an agonising metamorphosis, on the threshold between life and death.

Man on Fire undoubtedly has its roots in Shaw's own origins. As a child growing up in Belfast in the 1970s during The Troubles, conflict was a fact of life. However, this theme did not enter his work for his first 20 years as a practising artist. Shaw's early sculptures were informed by his longstanding – and ongoing – preoccupation with ancient civilisations, lores, rites and mythologies that he believes articulate truths about the dark, primeval forces which govern human nature.

The US-led invasion of Iraq 'opened up the sluice gates', he explains. Images of American soldiers torturing Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison in spring 2004 triggered a visceral 'from the heart response' to the war. The result was Shaw's towering sculpture *Casting a Dark Democracy* (2007-14; page 24), based on the most infamous image of abuse from the prison. The work comprises a hooded figure made from black baling plastic stretched and torn across

welded steel, wrapped with barbed wire, and with electrical wires protruding from the hands and feet. Standing on a box, head tilted with arms open wide, the spectral form conjures myriad associations across time: ancient hooded spirits found on Romano-Celtic sculptures, Catholic penitents, the Ku Klux Klan, the Grim Reaper, even a modern-day crucifixion. For Shaw it relates to 'the shape of something that trawls beneath the surface of the human collective conscious'.

Casting a Dark Democracy paved the way for *Man on Fire*, which itself drew on a number of sources. In 2005 news images (above) emerged showing British soldiers in flames clambering out of a Warrior armoured vehicle after a petrol bomb was thrown down its hatch – all survived their ordeal. Shaw created a sculpture of the scene called *Tank on Fire* (2007) but remained haunted by the images of men ablaze. 'I needed to create this figure that was lunging forward, on fire, desperately holding onto life,' he says. Other incidents also fed into the work's conception, such as the 2007 Glasgow Airport terrorist attack, Shaw's memory of driving into a Belfast riot surrounded by burning cars, and a visit to Pompeii to see the plaster casts of figures in their last moments of life.

The first version of *Man on Fire* was created in 2007 as a hypothetical proposal for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square. Small in scale, it nonetheless seethed with rage. The figure staggered atop a plinth dripping with oil that pooled below, evoking bloodshed and the spoils of that war. On the plinth was written: 'What God of Love Inspires Such Hatred in the Hearts of Men.'

A large version, made in 2009, dispensed with the plinth and text, and accumulated gravitas with scale, focusing the eye on the gravity-defying movement of the blazing figure who teeters miraculously on the ball of one foot. For the Imperial War Museum North »

» commission, the figure will be elevated upon a detritus-strewn plinth to ensure better visibility.

Man on Fire (2023) involved a complex fabrication process, which has been funded by the Royal Academy through the George Frampton Fund – bequeathed by the eponymous sculptor Academician for major public works – as well as the Arts Council. Shaw modelled the figure and flames in foam and the same black baling plastic used in *Casting a Dark Democracy* – a material that, when taut, he likes for its ‘directional texture’. He shares the sculptural language of Rodin and Giacometti in his meticulous working and reworking of these materials to get to the essence of his intended form. The whole figure is reinforced with a welded steel armature running through. The foundry then has the intricate job of lost-wax casting the sculpture in bronze in over 100 sections.

Man on Fire confronts the public with important questions about the justification for the Iraq invasion, its consequences and the human cost of war in general. There will be those who find this uncomfortable, even inflammatory, but Shaw counters, ‘What are we if our artists cannot ask those questions in a free society?’

— Elizabeth Fullerton is a critic and art historian

● **Man on Fire** will be unveiled at Imperial War Museum North, Salford, in spring

● **Casting a Dark Democracy** is on view in the exhibition ‘The Pain of Others’, Dox Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague, until 16 April



Above: *Casting a Dark Democracy*, 2007-14, by Tim Shaw RA



Making history Britain's 17th-century war artists

The founders of the English school of marine painting were in fact Dutch. Born in Leiden and active in Amsterdam, Willem van de Velde the Elder and his son Willem van de Velde the Younger moved to London in 1672 on the invitation of King Charles II. The monarch provided them with a studio at the Queen's House in Greenwich and each a salary of £100 per annum, Van de Velde the Elder for ‘taking and making Draughts of Sea Fights’ and his son ‘for putting the said Draughts into Colours for Our particular use’. Now 350 years later, their dramatic works return to the Queen's House, for an exhibition that reveals how father and son established the sea as a central subject in British art.

Van de Velde the Elder went to sea as a war artist during the Anglo-Dutch Wars and was present at a number of major naval battles. His sketches of incidents served as the basis for later detailed grisailles (pen paintings) and canvases. On the left-hand side of a grisaille of the Battle of Scheveningen of 1653 he even included a small galliot from which he can be seen drawing the action, alongside a younger man (possibly his son) who watches on.

Before settling in England, the pair usually depicted battles from a Dutch perspective; after their move their focus shifted to English warships and yachts, as well as showing battle scenes from an English viewpoint.

Van de Velde the Elder sketched the momentous Battle of Solebay in May 1672, including the burning of the English flagship the *Royal James* at the climax of the conflict. His drawings later helped to create the monumental Solebay Tapestry which, recently restored, is a highlight of the Queen's House exhibition. His son – the more accomplished painter – used his father's drawings to paint his canvas *The Burning of the Royal James* (c.1672; above). The vessel is shown at the centre-right of the painting (with the Earl of Sandwich's blue admiral's flag visible on the main mast) at the moment a Dutch fireship, the *Vrede*, is about to run into it and set it on fire. English sailors are jumping from the bow and stern, and to the right a Dutch Vice-admiral's ship also takes part in the attack. The small boat in the right foreground rows the crew of the Dutch fireship to safety; the sinking ship in the left foreground is possibly a fireship that failed in an earlier assault. In one enthralling image, the Van de Velde's powerfully bring to life military history, including the last moments of seamen who fought on that day.

— Elaine Murphy is Associate Professor of Maritime History at the University of Plymouth

● **The Van de Velde's: Greenwich, Art and the Sea** The Queen's House, London, 2 March–14 Jan 2024