

Robert Bryce Muir
Man of Steel

BY ANDREW MYERS

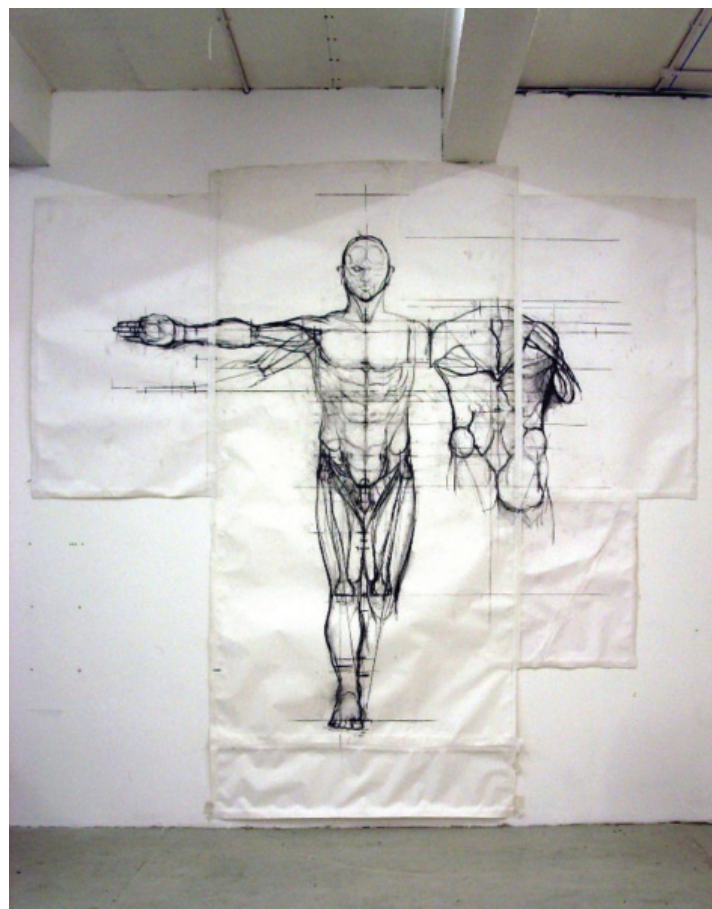


Nine-foot-tall men of steel are hardly unheard of in Los Angeles, but customarily they are comic book heroes transported to the silver screen by Hollywood studios. Not so *Angel of the Americas*, a 9 1/2-foot-tall stainless steel sculpture by the British artist Robert Bryce Muir (b. 1962), which occupies pride-of-surprising-place in the Alexander McQueen boutique on Melrose Avenue.

Designed by McQueen and his longtime collaborator, architect William Russell, and completed in 2008, the store encompasses 3,100 square feet featuring shades of white, soft natural light, and smooth plaster walls that, by turn, arch upward, forming vaults, and extend downward, forming stalactite-like pillars that hover above a gray terrazzo and mother-of-pearl floor. The duo's first "ground up" project together, this space combines theatricality and restraint, conjuring the future (sleek

Angel of the Americas
2008, Stainless steel, 115 x 73 in.
Alexander McQueen boutique, Los Angeles





Angel of the Americas (Scaled-up technical/engineering drawing)
2008, Charcoal on paper, 127 1/2 x 129 in.
Collection of the artist



minimalism, reflective surfaces, and sophisticated lighting) alongside the past, which is evoked through classical architectural forms and an atmosphere that, for a venue pushing \$1,000 shoes and \$6,000 dresses, seems surprisingly still, even ... spiritual?

It's an adjective that would not have surprised McQueen, the darling of the design world who committed suicide in 2010 at age 40. Indeed, he likened the space to a cathedral.¹ Little surprise, then, that in order to see his vision's *pièce de résistance*, visitors crossing the threshold must look up. There, approximately four feet above their noses, centered inside a wide, doughnut-shaped ring, they will see articulated metal feet and calves that, as visitors move under the lightwell, prove to be part of Muir's large-scale, site-specific commission: a monumental nude that continues to rise upward, its head, shoulders, and upper torso passing through the encircling skylight. With gaze downcast to connect with its observers, the sculpture seems to levitate, devoid of support. He is in equilibrium, seemingly able to ascend or descend, always watching. (Prospective shoplifters, take note.)

"The angel takes the form of a sentinel who is momentarily at a point of stasis as he moves through a membrane between parallel states," explains Muir. He adds that the sculpture is a constant presence



Mea Culpa

2006, Steel and rope, overall height 14 ft.

Hanging figure 122 in. high;

Pulling figure 82 1/2 in. high

Grizedale Sculpture Forest, Cumbria, England



Mea Culpa (detail)

by walls or objects,” he says. “It travels through everything to reinforce its omnipresence.”

McQueen imbued the sculpture with symbolic meaning equally rich and pervasive, stating that he took inspiration from the iconic *Christ the Redeemer* statue overlooking Rio de Janeiro, as well as from Los Angeles’s sobriquet, City of Angels. “L.A., like London, has so many art collectors, and I wanted to give a focal point to the store,” McQueen told *Women’s Wear Daily* when the boutique was unveiled.² (Never one to forgo a bit of cheek, McQueen, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, took “a small amount of glee” in pointing out the angel is “anatomically correct.”³)

Both Muir and staffers at the McQueen headquarters in London concur that the designer was introduced to Muir’s work in 1992 at *Figures in Iron*, a solo exhibition of the artist’s large-scale pieces at the Concord Lighting Gallery in central London. Fast forward 15 years to October 2007, to Muir and McQueen’s first meeting to explore a commission, at which McQueen produced a picture of the highly expressive and kinetic *Mea Culpa*, one of Muir’s most technically involved and difficult sculptures (currently sited in Grizedale Forest in the northwestern English county of Cumbria).

“overlooking everyone who enters the space and everything that happens within it,” akin to the mythical guardians common in ancient buildings. He also notes that the angel’s head and upper torso are visible from certain vantage points along the street and neighboring buildings. “I wanted to use this feature to portray the figure’s energy radiating outward all around its environment,” says the 49-year-old artist, who considers the context, location, and materiality of all his work, and particularly how sculpture affects — and is affected by — its setting and placement. “The energy is not restricted

Stepping Female (Figure study)
2004, Lead, 29 x 14 1/2 in.
Private collection

"He really liked that piece, particularly the hanging figure, and this formed the basis for our initial discussion," Muir recalls.

That discussion progressed to focus on a female form passing through a membrane, at which point Muir invited McQueen to his studio. "Once there, McQueen saw two life-size steel figures that changed the direction of the commission. One was *Crucifixion*, and the other was the figure from *Unto the Self*," says Muir, adding that while McQueen was especially keen on the former, the two eventually agreed a similarly themed work would be too extreme. "But the idea of a figure with an outstretched pose became a good way to move forward," Muir adds. "This is how the idea of a sentinel came about; it could still have the forcefulness of *Crucifixion* and the quiet presence of *Unto the Self*."

Before embarking on *Angel's* design and construction, Muir recognized several discrete and novel challenges. There was the tight time frame: the sculpture had to be completed and installed in Los Angeles the following May. There was the fact that Muir is very selective about accepting commissions: "I have always worked very privately, my practice being isolated and very solitary," he says. "I guard my independence jealously and it's important that I only answer to myself, as I have to be able to see clearly and be able to work my own agenda." There were also design, production, and engineering challenges particular to the piece's future location. "The space was basically a large round tube leading to a skylight with very specific parameters and dimensions," Muir says. How would the sculpture be perceived from below? How could it appear to "pass through" the skylight? How could it be secured in position and yet appear to float? And how could it be safely anchored — airborne, surrounded by glass — in an environment given to high heat and earthquakes?

Bearing these questions and concerns in mind, Muir did what he has done since his childhood: he started to sketch. "Drawing is a part of the ongoing process and is used at every stage, taking many forms: from working out anatomical relationships between muscle groups to more engineering-type drawings, which work out how the sculpture can technically develop," says the artist, whose website calls drawing not merely the core of his practice, but the basis of his understanding of, well, everything.

ALWAYS MAKING

Born in North Yorkshire, the youngest of three brothers, Muir was raised in Nuneaton (a town near Coventry in the industrial Midlands) by his mother, a professional dancer in her youth and a lifelong lover of music and performance who early on recognized and encouraged Muir's creativity and artistic prowess. "It wasn't so much a formal approach to 'art appreciation,' more that she created a total freedom to think, create, and explore which still informs my approach today," says Muir. Earliest memories include drawing and "making" — sitting at a large table with a roll of wallpaper: "I would draw on the back of it and just keep going until the roll had finished" — and a passion for Greek and Roman mythology and arms and armor. "The early experiments in forming shape using cardboard and Sellotape to make shields, armor, or helmets were instrumental in how I learned to work materials and construct later on," Muir says.



Academic training came in a two-year foundation course at Nuneaton School of Art, focusing on sculpture and painting, followed by an undergraduate degree with honors at Kidderminster/Wolverhampton School of Art. Muir says the latter "taught me a huge amount of new ways of expressing shape and form, using pattern and how to work in a disciplined spatial context." Finally, he earned a master's degree at London's Royal College of Art (RCA), "which brought me back to using drawing as a tool for experimentation, which led me from two- into three-dimensional interpretations of my work." Immediately upon finishing at the RCA, Muir began *Mea Culpa*, initiating a 25-year stretch of sculpture that continues to take form. "There was no moment of revelation, just a thorough grounding in various disciplines which made me realize that sculpture was the best way to interpret my ideas," he says.

For Muir, these ideas might stem from influences that are autobiographical and specific, but they invariably extend to the universal. "The works are sculptural observations and journeys into meaning, and are very personal interpretations of questions that often can't be answered," he says. "They address the dichotomy of the human condition, that of giving form to the fleeting moments of clarity that we all have." His goal is to reveal, or at least give glimpses of, the essential: to peel back layers of personal and cultural accretion, to connect conscious and subconscious, and thereby, as he says, to "allow a pause, a moment to contemplate the perceived world and our place in it, and then go beyond the constructs



Unto the Self (Back study)
2006, Copper, 31 x 22 in.
Private collection

and conditioning to think about what it is to be human in the world we don't see but know is there."

And while the artist recognizes the classical and romantic influences in his work, he underscores that his aim is not to represent the "ideal," but rather to reinterpret notions of the classical tradition and apply them in a contemporary language. "In this context, narrative is fascinating as it can work on so many levels," he says. "The figures are involved in extreme physical actions, and in that sense the narrative is implied, but it also creates space to build the story. I want the viewer to consider the before and after — how this has come to be and why it's happening."

A COMPLEX BUT SPEEDY PROCESS

With *Angel of the Americas*, Muir found initial connection and meaning from the angel's pose. As with many of his pieces, he used himself as an early model. "When I assumed the pose myself to establish an insight, an overwhelming sense of calmness, of energy being stabilized and held in place, immediately became apparent," he says. An understanding established, what Muir calls "the build" could then commence. "There is a distinction in the build process between constructing and sculpting," Muir says. "They are totally separate methodologies, but are vital to the whole, and both need to be constantly reworked, depending on what is required of them. The internal frame, for example, is an engineering framework which has to take weight, support on a structural level, and stabilize; the outer form, the essence, is sculpted, shaped, and is the sculpture."

Early in this process, the artist decided not to elongate the sculpture for reasons of siting and viewer perspective, preferring it to be

proportionally correct. In order to position the work correctly and to explore how to best secure it to the building while accounting for the glass, Muir also built a frame to simulate the skylight and its architectural dimensions. "To make sure it could cope with the pressure of powerful earth tremors, I devised the 'earthquake test' and applied it at every stage of the build," he says, explaining this meant grabbing the frame and shaking it furiously to mimic large shockwaves.

Once he was satisfied with the angel's frame, its pose and positioning, the sculpting began. Cutting strips from 8' x 4' flat sheets to follow the sculpture's anatomical form, Muir "cold beat" the steel freeform on a wooden block to achieve the desired shape, "using a variety of specially designed hammers which I adapt and carve myself." While he often referred to a full-scale drawing to confirm scale and proportion, Muir underscores the dynamism of the process. "Everything was cut through and nothing was considered sacrosanct. As the figure progressed, the use of exaggeration and emphasis to define areas in sculptural terms meant that the steel was pushed to its limits, and this in itself was an important contribution to how the figure evolved," he says. "As with all my work, I exaggerate the musculature to enhance the narrative — there is immense strain in this body, as it needed to exert its presence. I felt it was important that the senses are momentarily assaulted as you initially confront the figure."

And then, after much work and reworking, appraisal and reappraisal, *Angel* was finished. Muir traveled to Los Angeles, where he oversaw the reassembly (it was built and shipped in two components) and installation: on time, on budget, and to McQueen's evident satisfaction. In addition to glowing words attributed to McQueen in media coverage of the boutique's opening, a spokesperson at McQueen headquarters confirms via e-mail, "Lee loved the final sculpture and was proud of the artwork."

And Muir? He and his work were exposed to a new, international audience. He learned that he was invigorated and inspired by the pressure of the tight deadline, and realized that accepting a commission need not compromise his process or approach. "My work was wanted for what it was without having to change its nature or its representation, which was very important," he says.

There is also Muir's pride and pleasure at how the angel, once finished and in place, took flight. "It was only when Will [William Russell] and I had finished the installation that I could really see how the sculpture worked in its space. The first thing that struck me was how incredibly powerful and clear the light is in L.A., and how this affected the piece. With a pure blue sky as a backdrop, the piercing sunlight immediately affected the contrast. It became like a drawing with a strong chiaroscuro effect that was fantastic, bringing out subtleties in the form I had never seen before. It was very profound." **n**

ANDREW MYERS writes about the arts and design for a smorgasbord of national, regional, and city magazines and newspapers.

Information: The Alexander McQueen boutique is located at 8379 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90069, 323.782.4983, alexandermcqueen.com

Endnotes

1. "In A New Light," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 April 2008.
2. "McQueen Makes Bold L.A. Statement," *Women's Wear Daily*, 7 April 2008.
3. "In A New Light," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 April 2008.

