

The unveiling of Mark Quinn's monumental sculpture *Allison Lapper Pregnant* on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square deserves to be recognized, and appreciated, for the complex political act that it is.

Complaints voiced about the sculpture typically obscure its political point and appear to be of two types. One group suggests that Allison Lapper's heroism as a British citizen does not warrant her inclusion in a square devoted to the celebration of great national deeds. How can you compare the little, personal heroism of Lapper to the public, martial bravery of Nelson, they ask?

The other predominant complaint is aesthetic, that Lapper lacks traditional feminine charm. "I don't think it's beautiful at all. I would have liked something a bit more feminine," was one reaction reported in the *Independent*. The aesthetic complaint may also be amorphously applied to the sculpture itself: "It's not good art," meaning, "it's not beautiful."

The interesting fact is that both complaints are true. They voice ironic truths which, like the title "King of the Jews" over Jesus' cross, level unsuspected accusations even as they are spoken. They are voices of a public which perceives in some inchoate way that Quinn has pointed a finger of prophetic judgement at a whole society. This is not shock for shock's sake, but shock art as moral challenge.

There are ample clues that the sculpture is a political act intended to expose society's complex and subtle injustices toward the disabled. The realist form and the literalist title both emphasize that we are not viewing idealised beauty, but a real person living a real life among us. Lapper emphasized this point at the unveiling. "We have been hidden away for way too long. It's about time people started to confront their prejudice," she said. Her hope is that both the political and aesthetic sensibilities of society will be changed by this political act. "I am very hopeful that this sculpture will make a difference. If you look at it, it is very beautiful as a piece of art. Disabled people are not vulgar, or ugly, or grotesque, and hopefully people will recognize that."

Her story is gut-wrenching stuff, recounted in her autobiography *My Life in My Hands*. Doctors did not allow Lapper's mother to see her at birth, informing her only that the infant was unlikely to survive. Society, represented by medical visions of human bodiliness, took one look at Lapper's body and, in the name of humanity,

declared her unfit to be part of her family. As an infant, her body had already meant her exclusion from the family.

It also meant her exclusion from public society, as she spent the next 19 years in institutions cut off from interaction with the rest of society. Her segregation from the outer world was matched by segregation in her inner world, as she was cared for by nurses who denied emotional attachment in the name of best practice. Her childhood holidays were trips across the street to the artificial limb workshop, or with a kindly nurse to caravans set up on site for parents visiting at holidays. Her parents didn't visit until learning she was alive through the request of another couple to adopt Lapper, a request they denied. They did, however, begin holiday appearances which one social worker described as, "not easy. Mrs Barber had only limited affection for Alison, which was described as a certain admiration mixed with pity and revulsion."

For society, family, and eventually her husband and lovers, Alison Lapper excited occasional spasms of interest and attention but was basically seen as a problem best dealt with by hiding away. It remains to be seen whether her appearance on the national stage will follow this pattern. If not, it will be because the political challenge of Mark Quinn's sculpture has been understood and appreciated. This will require some rather more careful self-examination than has yet appeared in the forum of the national media.

Let's revisit Lapper's heroism, which London's Mayor Ken Livingston is keen to tout. "This square celebrates the courage of men in battle. Alison's life is a struggle to overcome much greater difficulties than many of the men we celebrate and commemorate here," he said. "It is a work about courage, beauty and defiance, which both captures and represents all that is best about our great city." Livingston conveniently avoids unpacking what he means by her "courage, beauty and defiance" in his haste to co-opt it for the city he governs.

And this is where the critics have a point. Lapper's heroism is utterly unlike that normally celebrated in Trafalgar. Last week's victorious cricketers, or the naval hero Nelson, rally a nation against an external foe. Her heroism is surviving society's treatment, her enemies fellow citizens and their ideas of justice. Because her enemy is part of the national identity, her heroism only rallies a nation against itself.

By focusing attention on her body, Quinn asks us to consider the treatment from society it has called forth. Even cursory attention to her words at the unveiling and her autobiography reveal that her battle has not been primarily against her body,

but against the social treatment her body has evoked from the body politic. Thus to truly look at this body is to question modern society's claim to be egalitarian and humane. It is a challenge painful to contemplate, and therefore easy to again sweep out of sight by diffusing the political challenge of the statue.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas insightfully suggests in *Performing the Faith* that political acts such as the creation and public display of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* are modern society's way of talking about justice when the usual language of justice has failed. He contends that modern notions of justice and equality are rooted in Enlightenment conceptions of the human in which "normal" is a physically and mentally capable decision-maker and voter. The upshot is that "when people use the language of justice in the abstract in relation to the mentally handicapped, it turns out the mentally handicapped are judged not to have the characteristics to be treated justly" (230). Lapper's biography proves that the physically handicapped are likewise denied justice. If one has the misfortune to be born without arms, one ought not expect to be treated as an equal member of the public.

It is this point that Quinn has forcefully made with his sculpture. He has raised questions of social justice in a manner that circumvents the liberal, democratic definitions of justice within which it is hard to conceive of the handicapped as "one of us". There are presumably legitimate complaints to be made about the sculpture from various perspectives, but the complaints so far voiced have simply confirmed Lapper's and Quinn's critique: society has many "innocent" ways of silencing the disabled. Under cover of ideas about national heroism and the aesthetics of art or the feminine, complainers voice society's defence of its theory and practice of justice in a way which does not refute, but simply refuses the political question.

This silencing is abetted, unfortunately, by a problematic ambiguity of this political act. Sculpture, as an object, it is not self-interpreting, and as a visual statement it is particularly vulnerable to having its force as a political act diffused by reference to the aesthetic. As so many writers have pointed out, the beautiful often goes hand in hand with the unjust.

On a more problematic level, however, the statue partakes of the contemporary ambivalence of the display of the naked female form. Quinn cannot but be included with the marketers and advertisers who use the female nude to draw attention to something beyond the body itself. At the unveiling Lapper said the statue "puts disability and femininity and motherhood on the map." The problem, however,

may be that femininity is already on the map, and the current precedent for making points with pictures of bared female bits is not a promising one. The commodification and exploitation of female nudity is as problematic when used to draw attention to the exclusion of the disabled as it is in protecting fur-bearing animals or selling beer. The plea to be included in society ought not to have to come at the price of “baring it all”.

It is ironic that such exposure has afforded Alison Lapper the public face she has so often been denied. It is a complicated and problematic place in which to live, and one’s heart goes out to Lapper who lives daily among these complexities. The request of both artist and model is that we consider these complexities, some for the first time, and so consider the possibility of a different society and an altered aesthetic. If we were to see *Alison Lapper Pregnant* as beautiful, truly beautiful, society will indeed have become a very different place.