

DAVID BROWN
Deadly Sinners

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Deadly Sinners

Deadly Sinners is a new series of eleven bronze sculptures triggered by Anne Applebaum's Pulitzer Prize winning book *Gulag: A History* (2003), which explores the history of the labour camps in Siberia where millions of people were forcefully shipped during World War II. Imagining the terrifying train journeys to the frozen wastelands, Brown wondered what the train drivers were thinking, and so the first Sinner, *The Engine Driver* was born. The other ten "followed easily".

The exhibition will run from 17 October until 28 November 2015.



Studio View - Deadly Sinners

David Brown was born in Johannesburg in 1951 and studied Design and Photography at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, obtaining his degree in 1974. He was introduced to sculpture in 1975 by the prominent South African artist, and founding member of the Amadlozi Group, Cecil Skotnes (1926 - 2009).

Brown presented his first solo exhibition, *Dogs of War* in Johannesburg in 1980, and his first international showing was in 1985 at the Basel Art Fair in Switzerland. It was during this time that Brown began work on a commission for the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), which resulted in the monumental bronze and metal sculpture entitled *Tightroping*. He has participated in various group exhibitions locally and abroad, most notably: *Sculpture in The Making* at the South African National Gallery, Cape Town in 1982; the Cape Town Triennale in 1988; *AA Mutual Life VITA Art Now* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989, 1990 and 1992; *South African Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England in 1993; *Sculptural Work* at Galerie Anke in Dusseldorf, Germany in 1996 and *100 Years of South African Art* at IZIKO South African National Gallery in 2009. In 2012 he exhibited in *Rainbow Nation: South African Sculpture* at the Den Haag Museum in the Netherlands.

David Brown is known for his large commissioned works for collections in the United States, Europe and Southern Africa including the Milcetic Collection in New York and Hennenon House in England. His work is also included in major public and private collections such as the IZIKO South African National Gallery in Cape Town; the Pretoria Art Museum and UNISA Art Collection; the Zeitz Collection in Kenya and the Zeitz MOCAA Collection in Cape Town.

David Brown

The Soldier
2013-2015
Bronze
180 cm
Ed. of 3 + 2 AP

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The Lumberjack
2013-2015
Bronze
180 cm
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David Brown

The Surgeon
2013-2015
Bronze
188 cm
Ed. of 3 + 2 AP

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David Brown

The Boxer
2013-2015
Bronze
171 cm
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David Brown

The Lion Tamer
2013-2015
Bronze
168 cm
Ed. of 3 + 2 AP

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David Brown

The Doorman
2013-2015
Bronze
174 cm
Ed. of 3 + 2 AP

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David Brown

The Hunter
2013-2015
Bronze
180 cm
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David Brown

The Prison Warder
2013-2015
Bronze
178 cm
Ed. of 3 + 2 AP

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David Brown

The Engine Driver
2013-2015
Bronze
173 cm
Ed. of 3 + 2 AP

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The Butcher
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DAVID BROWN

Deadly Sinners

by Alexandra Dodd

I drew soldiers without noses; war cripples with crustacean-like steel arms; two medical soldiers putting a violent infantryman into a strait-jacket made of a horse blanket ... I drew a skeleton dressed as a recruit being examined for military duty. I also wrote poetry. George Groszⁱ

sinner | 'sinər|
noun

a person who transgresses against divine law by committing an immoral act or acts: wrongdoer, evildoer, transgressor, miscreant, offender, criminal; archaic trespasser.

What official miscreants are these? What dedicated representatives of misery? All hail the dutiful fiend going about his public duty with such muscular vigour. Let us make the acquaintance of this unholy gang of archaic trespassers, for they are our brothers and fathers, our uncles on the inside of our aunts. They are our most formidable nightmare and they are here to stay.

In 2011, David Brown made a satirical series called *11 Deadly Sinners*. Each of these small-scale sculptures features a full figure on a structure that relates to his character or crime. The butcher has his table and knives; the hunter cocks his rifle from his camouflaged hide.

The trigger for the series was Anne Applebaum's Pulitzer-prize winning book, *Gulag* (2004). The first fully documented history of the gulag, Applebaum's investigation picks up in the post-glasnost era from where Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* left off in the early 1970s. She describes how, arising out of the chaos of the Russian Revolution, Stalin's regime set up an immense regulated system of Soviet concentration camps which held millions of political and criminal prisoners as labourers and terrorized an entire society.

'I knew before reading that book, that it was bad, but I didn't know that it was *that* bad,' says Brown. 'Like the Holocaust, it entailed these terrible train journeys from cities like Moscow to Siberia, where people were forced into cattle trucks and died on route. The thought occurred to me: I wonder what the man who drove the train was thinking. So the first sinner I made was called *The Engine Driver*. I made him life-size and he stands on actual railway tracks. That was the starting moment'ⁱⁱ.

The intuition that led to this related series occurred in Florence. Walking through the Uffizi gallery, Brown encountered halls and halls of busts of Roman emperors and knew instantly that 'the next logical step would be turn the sinners into busts'ⁱⁱⁱ.

The Roman emperors, the busts, the butcher, the soldier, the boxer, the preacher – these are strikingly masculine works firmly focused on the male psyche. Apart from a few (largely androgynous) female characters on ships in his *Voyagers* series, Brown has hardly made any female figures. It is the masculine iconography of power that he self-reflexively inhabits. Using the bust – an imperial form of propaganda – he interrogates the complicity of systematic offence from the inside.



The Engine Driver | 2013-2015 | Bronze | 171 cm | Ed. of 3 + 2 AP

'I try to create figures that embody our own fears,' he says. 'This is a brutal society and it feels like it has always been like this. I use fantasy to describe reality'^{iv}. Not interested in critiquing complicity from the outside, Brown seeks to embody it – to establish empathy for the condition of being entangled in the crime. 'We are all in that position, turning blind eyes to abuse of most kinds. That is one of the paradoxes of the human psyche'^v. Which brings us back to the question: what was the train driver thinking?

What Brown read in Applebaum's book resonated with memories of the police abuses he saw as a young boy growing up in the blue-collar belt of Mondeor, south of Johannesburg, in the 1960s; the aftermath of the forced removals he witnessed from his studio in a dilapidated industrial building on the edge of District Six that he shared with a bunch of punk rock bands, welders and carpenters in the late 1980s; and the ongoing brutality of the culture around him. The *Deadly Sinners* are infused with a haunting sense of history's dark cycles repeating, not just locally but transnationally.

His father, the journalist and writer James Ambrose Brown, was the first reporter on the scene of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. Before that, he fought in World War II and wrote a diary of the horrors of fighting in the watershed Second Battle of El Alamein in Mara Matruh, Egypt in 1942. After recuperating in Cairo, he was recalled to his South African unit at the start of the battle with the words: 'You're just in time for the bloodbath'^{vi}.

Two decades before that, Brown's grandfather fought in the Battle of Delville Wood, a series of engagements in the 1916 Battle of the Somme in World War I.

'He was in the trenches with his brother who was hit by a shell and blown up in front of him,' says Brown. 'He carried many wounded men out of the trenches and was later awarded a Distinguished Service Order medal, but he was a complete wreck after the War, and became an alcoholic' ^{vii}.



The Butcher | 2013-2015 | Bronze | 172 cm | Ed. of 3 + 2 AP
The Prison Warden | 2013-2015 | Bronze | 178 cm | Ed. of 3 + 2 AP

The defiant spirit and brut aesthetic language of the *Deadly Sinners* series has much in common with Pink Floyd frontman Roger Waters's recently released film, *Roger Waters: The Wall* (2015). Part concert, part road movie and part anti-war film, it commemorates the death of Waters's grandfather and father who died in World War I and II. Like Waters's film, Brown's busts summon the ghosts of intergenerational trauma – horrors that were never spoken out loud, but hovered around bedrooms and lounges infiltrating the lives of everyone in the house.

These deep cycles of history are called to life by the forms and surfaces of his bronzes. A combination of modeling and found objects or 'three-dimensional tattoos' ^{viii}, each one of these sculptures is an archive of found objects retrieved from the artist's own life and the lives of others – old telephones (their wires always cut in a gesture of failed communication), buttons, babies' dummies, buckles, belts, dildos, binoculars, trinkets, charms, coins and toys that once belonged to the artist's son, who is now a man – a little bear, a locomotive, a superhero... These objects hold time. From old Bakelite telephones to mobile phones, their technologies span a century, underlining the uncanny, déjà vu quality of historical disaster. The passage of time is also referenced in the colour variations in the surface patinas. Polished stumps shine with an immediate gleaming vitality that is offset by areas of antique green, which recall the deep time of mossy cemeteries, headstones and monuments.

A small Italian coin embedded in the surface of one of the busts bears the imprint of Leonardo da Vinci's *L'Uomo Vitruviano* or the Vitruvian Man, a drawing based on the correlations of ideal human proportions with geometry described by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius in Book III of his treatise *De Architectura* ^{ix}.

In the context of these distorted, amputated, truncated, tumorous bodies, this might be read as a quiet joke embedded into the surface of the sculpture. A small spoon on the depraved corporeality of his figures, it says a lot about Brown's understated nature and wit.

Of course, there is no shortage of humour here. A pulsing vein of comedic energy runs across the series, which pokes fun at the dogged persistence of well-worn and instantly recognisable male archetypes. Like the back of a fat neck at a rugby game, these characters feel uncomfortably familiar.

You've somehow encountered them before; you see them everyday. The *Deadly Sinners* are grotesques – overblown, cartoon-like renditions of accepted norms, a subversive embodiment of the various roles and categories of personhood necessary to the maintenance of the status quo.

On the one hand, each character is distinct and idiosyncratic. The surgeon has his scissors, the lumberjack, his axe; the preacher, his crucifix; the hunter, his binoculars. On the other, they seem to blend into each other, becoming quite indistinguishable from one another. They all appear blinded by their goggles, they are all wearing hats, they are all trussed up with bandages and plasters, many of them smoking cigarettes...

In their totality, they radiate an anxious doubleness. Cyborgs of officialdom, their uniforms, epaulettes and regalia have become incorporated into their bodies. Clearly they are perpetrators of dastardly, violent acts, but they also convey an immediate and embodied sense of personal torment – a state of terror that is at once internal and external. They appear terrifically solid, powerful, doggedly invincible, potent. And yet their bodies are wounded, truncated, severed, deformed, irreparably marked by stumps and amputations, inadequately bolstered by makeshift prosthetics. Their surfaces have been scoured and scratched with rasps and files, their bodies broken, mangled, twisted and messed with to a point of impotence.

That is where of the paradox lies. The stumps, humped backs and bodily protruberances are some of the most tactile elements of these sculptures. Polished and buffed, there is a radiance and strange sensuality about them. They invite touch. The longer you spend with them, the more their mortality takes hold. 'Children have always liked my work,' says Brown^x. Like fairy stories, there is something terrifying in the encounter, but also liberating. If you can see it, touch it, walk around it, it can no longer hold you in its inchoate grip.

Alexandra Dodd is an independent writer and editor. She holds a Master of Arts from Concordia University, Montreal, and a PhD in Literature from the University of Cape Town.

(Endnotes)

ⁱ Friedrich, Otto (1986). *Before the Deluge*. USA: Fromm International Publishing Corporation. p 37.
ⁱⁱ Brown, D. Interviewed by: Dodd, A. (5 and 7 October 2015).
ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
^{iv} Ibid.
^v Ibid.
^{vi} '28 October 1942: El Alamein – Montgomery regroup his troops', *World War II Today*, ww2.today.com. Accessed 12 October 2015.
^{vii} Brown, D. Interviewed by: Dodd, A. (5 and 7 October 2015).
^{viii} Ibid.
^{ix} 'Leonardo's Vitruvian Man'. <http://leonardodavinci.stanford.edu/submissions/clabaugh/history/leonardo.html> Accessed 12 October 2015.
^x Brown, D. Interviewed by: Dodd, A. (5 and 7 October 2015).

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