

Mark Wallinger

The artist gets back in the saddle

THE OBSERVER PROFILE by Oliver Marre

If Mark Wallinger triumphs in the competition to build the £2m public work of art already dubbed the 'Angel of the South' – the winner is revealed in September – anyone entering Britain on a Eurostar train will, in the future, be greeted by an enormous white stallion, 164ft high. That is Wallinger's idea for what should stand on the brow of a hill in the new town of Ebbsfleet Valley, next to Ebbsfleet International station, one of five designs shortlisted for the landmark sculpture (fellow Turner Prize winners Rachel Whiteread and Richard Deacon are also shortlisted).

It was only after he had come up with the plan that the artist realised the horse is the symbol of the county, deriving, as he has subsequently explained, from Horsa, 'the semi-mythological leader of the Anglo-Saxons who landed on Thanet in the 6th century'. For those familiar with Wallinger and his career, however, the image will be as much about the artist as the county in which it will sit.

In 1992, Charles Saatchi bought 'Race, Class, Sex', a series of paintings by Wallinger of racehorses. It seems a peculiar subject for a Young British Artist of the Damian Hirst and Rachel Whiteread generation, but for Wallinger, the racing world encapsulates the country's three national obsessions – he describes horse breeding as 'eugenics by proxy and it's no accident the aristocracy were interested in that'. A year later, he bought into a horse-owning syndicate, arranged with his friend and long-time dealer Anthony Reynolds and named their horse A Real

Work of Art.

It ran in the suffragette colours of green, violet and white and Wallinger, dressed in drag, was photographed for *Self-Portrait as Emily Davison*, at the point on the Epsom course where Davison threw herself in front of the king's horse in 1913. The syndicate's runner was injured after one race and sold to a German collector. She eventually ran again and Reynolds tells me she has offspring, all with the word 'art' in their names, still running in the suffragettes' colours.

This project can stand as a metaphor for much of Wallinger's career. His work is the subject of critical debate, garnering great praise and sometimes ridicule. *The Observer's* art critic Laura Cumming calls him both 'the one great philosopher' of his generation and its leading agnostic. 'Nobody else is as concerned with questions of deity, grace and the afterlife,' she says.

On the other hand, Brian Sewell of the *Evening Standard* complains: 'None of his utterly negligible conceits, his silly semi-blasphemies... is worth such a self-pompous installation' and calls him 'a dull painter of horses'.

Everyone agrees, however, that he is not afraid of grand artistic statements, nor of including himself in his work (most notably dressing up as a bear and wandering around an art gallery for the Turner Prize exhibition in 2007). Indeed, quite often, it is the concept rather than the execution of the art for which Wallinger is responsible.

Arguably his most famous piece, for which he won the 2007 Turner Prize,

was a recreation of Brian Haw's one-man anti-war protest, copied from Parliament Square and displayed under the title of *State Britain*. Wallinger planned the work and then asked Michael Smith, who has a team of people working in a warehouse on the Old Kent Road in south east London, to build it.

Using Smith was not unusual; for a man who has worked in photography, film, paint, sculpture and other media, the need for Wallinger to get on with so-called 'fabricators' is an important skill. The cost of the exercise was reported to be £90,000 and the Turner Prize money was £25,000 but, rather like the racehorse that never won a race, as art it was a success. It marked Wallinger's ascent to the pinnacle of the modern art world. He was nominated once before for the Turner, in 1995, and lost out to Damian Hirst, which he described as 'painful'. There are not a lot of people who find themselves nominated for the Turner Prize twice, with a 12-year gap.

Mark Wallinger was born in Chigwell, Essex, in 1959 into a house in which enthusiasm for the arts was encouraged. His father, a fishmonger, taught him to paint and his younger sister has become an actress. 'I thought all kids were taken to the National Gallery and the V&A at weekends,' he says of his childhood. 'We were also a fanatical ballet family. I saw Fonteyn and Nureyev, and Baryshnikov and Makarova dancing with the Kirov before they defected.'

Metropolitan snobbery about Chigwell annoys him and, although he now



lives with his wife on the south bank of the Thames in London, he remains a supporter of the local football team of his youth, West Ham. His interest in ballet has also endured; he would like to work with Sadler's Wells one day, he has said.

After a degree at the Chelsea School of Art, he enrolled in 1983 for an MA at Goldsmiths in London, where he subsequently taught. Among his students was Hirst and he awarded Gary Hume a first-class degree. Meanwhile, Wallinger's degree show was spotted by Reynolds, who has represented him ever since.

'I thought it was so exciting, I moved the whole lot to my gallery,' says Reynolds. 'I saw in it a combination which is still present in all his work, of an incredible visual inventiveness and very subtle content. It was brilliantly ambitious.'

Until last year, Wallinger had not painted for 13 years, but his early work involved a lot of oils. In 1990, before he turned his attention to horses, he produced a series called 'Capital' in which he depicted his friends posing as homeless people outside financial landmarks. This series was typical of its time in being stridently anti-Thatcherite but, rather than worrying about the fact that these paintings, too, were snatched up by Saatchi, the Conservatives' advertising man, Wallinger enjoyed what he described as the 'redoubled' irony of it.

Since then, he has ticked every box in terms of where a successful young artist should be exhibited. In 1995, he had a show at the Serpentine Gallery in London and two years later his work was included in Saatchi's controversial Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy. In 1998, he was awarded a Henry Moore Fellowship at the British School in Rome and in 1999, he was asked to fill the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, and provided *Ecce Homo* to huge public acclaim.

It was not just the public who liked his white resin lifesize figure of Christ, with bowed shoulders and shaven head; the Queen's chaplain wrote to say he had trouble imagining Christ as human and God at the same time, but Wallinger's depiction provided him with an enlightening moment.

It was a reaction that particularly

pleased Wallinger, who studied James Joyce as part of his MA programme (his first suggestion for a thesis was racing, but the tutor told him to think again) and says that he has been influenced by the author's concept of an 'epiphany' or spiritually revealing instant. He went to Sunday school as a child, gave up and became an atheist before finding his present agnostic position.

Wallinger appears to stand apart from his iconoclastic and hedonistic Brit pack contemporaries. This summer, he will unveil a new work at the Folkestone Triennial, which is presenting works specially created for public spaces. 'He is quiet, humble and private,' says Sigrid Wilkinson, the co-director of Arts Co, who are development consultants for the Triennial. 'In the past, we have asked him if he'd like to judge prizes and he always says no. He's not interested in making his life public property and his work isn't all about autobiography. But when it comes to helping us fundraise or discussing the logistics of arranging an exhibition, he's been amazing.'

Wallinger is also generous; he has offered his contribution, *Folk Stones*, which will pay homage to Folkestone's Road of Remembrance (commemorating the First World War), as a permanent gift to the city.

This will not, however, silence his critics. When the Turner nominees were announced in 2007, Will Self opined: 'There was nothing "political" about Haw's camp unless unabashed naivety is an ideologue, and there's nothing artistic about Wallinger's slavish copying.'

Wallinger is not afraid of these debates and his giant horse is bound to draw more of the same. The question that will inevitably arise when the shortlisted works go on display at the Bluewater shopping centre this month – the winner will be selected by a committee chaired by the Lord Lieutenant of Kent, Allan Willett – will be whether a big stallion constructed at great cost by other people is really worthy of a £2m public commission.

But while Wallinger is excited about the possibility of this work, it is by no means his only plan for the year. In addition to the Folkestone Triennial, his biggest solo show to date opens at Aarau in Switzerland at the end of August. And,

just as he went back to painting after a 13-year hiatus, to horses after a 15-year break, or on to the Turner Prize nominees list after a 12-year absence, the future will undoubtedly hold further surprises.

The Turner Prize-winner has never been afraid of courting criticism. His latest project, a return to one of his favourite themes, could be his most controversial statement yet: a 164ft-high white stallion in Kent



THE WALLINGER LOWDOWN

Born Chigwell, Essex, in 1959. Father a fishmonger who taught him to paint. Went first to Chelsea School of Art and then Goldsmiths College.

Best of times Huge public acclaim greeted *Ecce Homo*, his lifesize statue of Jesus Christ on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. The bishops loved it too.

Worst of times Losing to Damien Hirst in the 1995 Turner Prize, which Wallinger

described as 'painful'. He triumphed in 2007, however.

What he says 'It's quite odd to have been brought up in a place later held up to complete ridicule.'
On growing up in Chigwell.

'I never knew before what footballers meant when they said, "It hasn't really sunk in yet."

'Now I know what they mean. I think

I've been practising losing for six months'
On winning the Turner Prize in 2007.

What others say 'He's hugely good company, well-informed and well-read. And *State Britain* is one of the most important political works of art ever.'
Dealer Anthony Reynolds.

'Wallinger's work is... straightforward to the point of tedious banality.'
Critic Brian Sewell.