

Press Release:

**LAURENCE EDWARDS**  
**Doncaster Heads: Portraits of a Mining Community**  
**7 January – 15 February 2020**  
**Messums London**



*Sculpting and story-telling melted into one another. The intimacy of having the likeness of one's head moulded by a stranger seems to have encouraged an openness in the miners. Laurence's first genius is as a sculptor, but he is also an attentive talker and listener; one instinctively trusts him and feels willing to share. This listening and sharing happened again and again in Doncaster; by the end of his time there, Laurence had sculpted and spoken with around forty people.*

Robert Macfarlane

In 2018 Laurence Edwards was awarded a commission by the City of Doncaster for a sculptural installation celebrating and remembering the lives of those who had lived and worked in the pits around Doncaster. Edwards decided to sculpt 40 portraits of former miners to be installed in the city centre. Sculpted from life in two-hour sittings, the portraits are beautifully modelled; affectionate yet sincere and as much a product of the conversations and relationship between the artist and his sitters as pure observation.

As a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Sculptures, Edwards' mastery of modelling from life was evident, yet this exhibition offers a rare chance to see this very traditional skill at the forefront of his work. That each sculpture was completed in just two hours is a

remarkable feat of observation and skill, with the speed lending a vitality that runs through the series.

*'My hands were like they were at a typewriter, going around the block as I was listening to these stories,' he says. 'It became so engaging that the heads just evolved in my hands. It was almost a subconscious act. So it was an incredible moment of realisation for me. And the films and the stories that evolved were so powerful that it became a package.'*

The final work – to be unveiled in Doncaster in May 2020 - will feature each of these 40 portraits, cast in bronze and set within small niches in a section of local rock, as though they were a seam of coal. Footage of the sittings filmed by students at Doncaster College will be available to view alongside the final installation in Doncaster, keeping the men and their stories at the forefront of the work. It is a celebration of everyday heroism and a far cry from the romanticised figures on pedestals of the past and indicative of a current desire to commemorate social histories in public sculpture.

The Doncaster Heads series will be shown as a preview at Messums London in January, an exciting opportunity to see this historic public sculpture before it settles in its permanent home in the heart of Doncaster.

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## **Laurence Edwards – Digging Deep** **Mark Hooper, 2019**

Laurence Edwards is renowned for the visceral nature of his sculptures, which artfully combine figurative portraiture with landscape, presenting us with characters that are inextricably linked to the earth.

For *A Rich Seam*, he has adapted his approach in order to fully explore subjects that are embedded both in the local community and its geography. On the surface, in sculpting the heads of 40 Doncaster miners in miniature, he has produced some of his most literal portrait work. Each of the heads, created in wax from an initial two-hour long live 'consultation', is an accurate likeness of the individual sitter: a feat in itself given the time constraints of the project.

Despite being a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Sculptors, he admits it's been a long while since he's had the opportunity to demonstrate the very traditional skill of live modelling. 'I've never had that chance to push it and find a contemporary setting for it: to find a place for it to have a voice,' he says. 'It's been a wonderful way of finding that sculpture can be a tool for social engagement. It's become a vehicle for learning and communicating with people – and one that I never thought would have ever existed.'

Edwards describes the initial sittings – in which he was not only timed but filmed producing his likenesses, whilst simultaneously interviewing his subjects about their lives – as a leap of faith. 'It's a jump into the unknown. it's so quick, there's no time for correction, it's about getting the information down as fast as possible and hoping it works. With no safety net: it's a fast and scary ride. I'm submitting to a process that I have to trust will come good. An hour in and the guy behind the camera will say, "An hour's up" and you think, "I'm nowhere near! There's nothing here..." you get more and more focused until the last ten minutes when the interview often goes quiet and you find yourself digging deep to get the information in – something that will make this face resemble the subject – stripping it down to the bare

minimum getting the essentials – “What is this head about?” You realise what a luxury you have in other ways of making. This is a submission to a period of time and a mission that is unlike anything I’ve experienced.’

Despite the formality of public art of this kind (where it is literally ‘set in stone’ for posterity), Edwards inevitably delves deeper to fully explore the nuances in his work. ‘This project was really about their story, and the head is a vehicle towards that, rather than a thing in itself,’ he explains. ‘It’s quite a seismic shift for me to think about these people’s stories first and foremost rather than me making sculpture’.

Historically, a project such as this – a public sculpture celebrating and commemorating people who have contributed significantly to the community – would conform to certain norms – that romanticised, heroic statue on a pedestal, an idealised version of reality. But this project offers a very different paradigm: the everyday as the heroic, depicting and celebrating the real people of Doncaster with real stories and real faces... ‘Almost by accident, it’s tapped into this thread of public art now,’ agrees Edwards. ‘It’s no longer the generals on horseback in Trafalgar Square, it’s more about social histories. Chiming with the very contemporary way that public art is evolving, it’s timely.’

The final work will feature each of the 40 portraits, cast in bronze and set within small niches in giant blocks of large York stone as though they were a seam of coal. Each head will be connected to the film made during the portrait session, which can be digitally accessed by scanning a code with your phone. Thus, the viewer can witness first-hand the story of the head they are looking at, turning the piece into a living digital archive.

A six-foot bronze miner will stand amidst the stones, eyes closed, listening. ‘Miners talked about how at the end of a shift they listened to the geology settling when the machinery had quietened down, of how unsettling it was,’ says Edwards. This awareness of being part of the geology itself struck a chord with Edwards. But the sense of these men being one with the landscape was also tempered by a very different sense of earthiness in their character. These are, let’s not forget, both Yorkshire men and miners – people whose trust is hard won, meaning it is all the more valued.

Edwards undertook an extensive consultation process, he found himself touring the mining clubs of Doncaster with his laptop and projector. ‘Often unannounced,’ he interjects. ‘Usually in a pub with a load of blokes watching Doncaster vs Rotherham on the TV, and the barman going, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’ve never heard of you, what do you mean? What are you doing here?” I’d end up putting the projector on a billiard table and projecting onto the dartboard, standing under a TV screen and saying, “My name’s Laurence, I’m a sculptor from Suffolk and I’ve come to make a sculpture about you...”’

Many awkward silences later (and several return visits, in which he brought them up to date by showing the sketches he had developed in the meantime, gauging their responses and reactions), Edwards finally hit upon his idea. It was, he admits, partly spurred by his son, who was reading a book on Rodin and noticed the parallels between his father’s project and the great sculptor’s Burghers of Calais, which saw Rodin spending time modelling the citizens of Calais searching for a common physiognomy.

The intimacy of the process meant the atmosphere quickly became a warm and respectful one. ‘You’re given rare permission to study someone’s face for two hours - you become intimate very quickly, you feel trusted. They watch how your hands are working and see that you’re not a sap. You’re a guy with a skill – and skill it seems is appreciated, it breaks down

barriers. The subjects loved the idea of being celebrated, that their likenesses might last a long time in bronze and also having time to tell their story.'

The sense of allowing his hands to take over and be guided by the situation is typical of Edwards' methodology. A huge fan of the Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso (1858-1928), who spoke of letting the sculpture take control and evolve on its own terms, Edwards makes a feature out of what would normally be called 'casting errors' – the unforeseen strands, marks and detritus that are usually removed in the final process. 'Rosso is one of my heroes, with this idea that the work leads the way, a dialogue with material. That's definitely my *modus operandi*.'

While followers of Edwards' work might see this project as something of a departure, with its emphasis on 'straight' portraiture, dig a little deeper and the seams at the core of his work begin to expose themselves. One should perhaps see this work as a natural progression in his fascination with how the human and natural worlds intertwine. 'Very much so, that connection is there. The miners' stories are stories of the underworld. The world beneath our feet, literally, the images they portray and the life they describe is a dark, chambered, hard, grueling, dangerous, dirty world. I think the heads often reflect that. The more I do the better I get, finding asymmetries in the faces so they almost become pieces of nature in themselves. I love the idea of setting them back in rock – I've been very particular about the type of rock I'm using, which is a York stone from the area, indeed it is the bedrock that the coal is set within, a link back to an underground world.'

By displaying the final work in a central, public position in Doncaster, the miners are also presented as the heart of the community – indeed the reason why many of these communities exist... And after his initial trepidation, the community seems to have welcomed Edwards with an unexpected warmth. 'I was stunned at the positivity,' he says. 'There were times when I thought it would be impossible to get an idea that would satisfy all parts of this proud community. But the miners were very supportive, and the feedback from visitors has been, in some cases, emotional. I think we are tapping into something, creating a new community around the rock...'

Notes to editors:

Messums Wiltshire is leading multi-purpose gallery and arts centre, set inside a restored thirteenth-century tithe barn and surrounding buildings with exhibition space, sculpture garden and restaurant. Messums London is a refurbished 1950's gallery on Cork Street where the family have had a gallery presence since 1992. Messums offers artists and collectors a unique environment to experience and engage with creative endeavour across multiple artforms.

Exhibitions across the year complete and compliment a programme of events including screenings, talks, suppers and festivals at both our London and Wiltshire venues. Notable events to date include: Solo responses to the barn by Christopher Kurtz, Judy Pfaff, Michael Hulls and Bruce Munro; pioneering contemporary dance performances from The Russell Maliphant Company, Alexander Whitley Dance Company and MOVEMENT by Young Sadler's Wells Associate Choreographers; *Textile in Motion* with fashion collections by Henrik Vibskov, Joshua Millard and Sadie Williams as well as festivals celebrating Clay, Wood, Glass and Textile with contributions from some of the greatest makers and minds in each field.

A comprehensive list of past and future exhibitions can be found on our website [www.messumswiltshire.com](http://www.messumswiltshire.com)

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