

NIC FIDDIAN-GREEN
Sculpting on a monumental scale

a greek colossus

Inspired by the Parthenon's Selene Horse, one of the famed Elgin Marbles, Nic Fiddian-Green has created his latest in a line of monumental horse head sculptures to stand proud atop The Trundle, overlooking Goodwood's racecourse

WRITTEN BY JAY MERRICK PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN STEWART

NIC FIDDIAN-GREEN HAS BEEN OBSESSED BY A SINGLE PIECE OF ANCIENT SCULPTURE SINCE HE WAS A STUDENT AT THE CHELSEA SCHOOL OF ART IN THE 1980S. And now, inside a bitterly cold, open-sided barn on a hilltop a few miles east of Godalming, Surrey, the power of that obsession materialises in an almost hallucinatory way.

Before me stands the plaster-coated form of a giant horse's head more than 14ft high and 18ft from mane to nostril. It radiates an unearthly sense of stark otherness. The head is seamless in places, crudely fissured in others, as if it were still in the process of coming together. A mist of plaster dust smudges the air around its looming form, turning the weathered wood of the barn, the tweedy sweep of the fields, and the artist's paraphernalia – moulds, detritus, Christ on a crucifix pinned to a back wall – into a surreal dreamscape.

And out of the dream steps Nic Fiddian-Green, bulked up in winter clothing, his face and eyebrows ashen with plaster. One notices certain things about the 47-year-old immediately: hands and feet that don't like to be still, and pale blue eyes that are not so much piercing as searching. And when he speaks, every other word seems to be italicised for emphasis. He is, as Zen-inclined hippies used to say, like totally in the now.

A *visionary* now. There is a chance that this extraordinary bronze horse's head will be temporarily mounted on a 14ft high plinth on The Trundle above Goodwood racecourse in June. The prospect of this 28ft high artwork has not only intrigued Lord March, but inspired international fund managers Artemis to help fund the monumental work that is Fiddian-Green's masterpiece – and uncanny proof that, sometimes, the power of obsession can overcome the shadow of mortality.

The obsession is the Selene Horse, one of the controversial Elgin Marbles, which Fiddian-Green encountered at the British Museum in 1983. "I have absolutely no idea why," he says. "But that was it." This particular time-machine of mythic form and craft – infused with Fiddian-Green's love of imagery from 15th century icon-paintings by artists such as Rogier van den Weyden and Andrei Rublev – have >





Left: Nic Fiddian-Green, wrapped in layers of dust-caked clothing to protect him from the biting winter chill, enthuses infectiously about his latest monumental work of art. In the background sits the maquette of the head

Below left: working on the maquette with heat and copper sulphate solution to give the bronze some age

Below: a study in concentration; with angle grinder in action, Nic ensures the left nostril is perfect



dominated his work, which has been shown in London, New York, Dublin, Paris, Sydney, and Dubai. "I've always been fascinated by fragments," he says. "Something from the past that's still present; something put back together."

Sometimes, these Greek fragments – re-energised by life-studies of horses – generate beautifully flowing sculptures: the Horse At Water at Glyndebourne, for example, whose head seems to pour onto its gleaming jet-black plinth. The small works shown at London's Sladmore Gallery last summer ignite a very different range of resonances. Bronzes such as Touch, or Greek Head, have auras of perfect stillness, whereas Study for Fire and The Return radiate a tense, flexing power. The creative genetics of the giant horse's head I'm standing under originate in a pair of even more engrossing pieces shown at the Sladmore. Fiddian-Green's Trojan Fragment horses heads capture the compelling mystery of a Greek archetype, and a fugitive, almost spiritual sense of formal truth and time leak out of the seam-lines in the bronze.

But on this particular morning in late February, it's not the spiritual that prevails, but tension about the right cheek of his new creation, which seems heavy and inert, despite two deliberate fracture-lines in the plaster. "I completed the other side of the head in three days," says Nic. "It was a piece of cake. But look at this . . ."

Fiddian-Green reaches up to run his fingers over the plaster. "It's not working, is it? It's *wrong*."

The remark underlines something he'd said earlier: "I don't design, I *make*." In this case, the making began with Fiddian-Green and an assistant glueing together blocks of polystyrene to form a solid hulk of substrate that could be scraped, cut and re-built up into the required equine form. Then wet plaster was brushed or trowelled directly onto the polystyrene. In some places, it's not much more than a quarter of an inch thick; in others, where the eventual bronze surface will seem heavily ruptured, it stands proud by an inch or so. It is the varying thickness and textures of this plaster skin that the bronze will copy – for this will be a hollow sculpture, a horse's head that will appear solid only from a distance.

As Fiddian-Green attacks the problematic cheek with a brass-wired brush, the tension and sheer physicality of this man's art becomes obvious. He has three more days to get the head absolutely right. After that, to a strictly pre-determined schedule, a complex production process kicks in. The head, demarcated into some 30 sections of plaster, is coated with shellac, and then by a releasing agent. After that, a two- or >

HORSE AT WATER IN MARBLE ARCH

The creation of the 30ft-high bronze called Marwari Horse at Water is an artistic triumph over the most extreme adversity. Nic Fiddian-Green was commissioned to create the piece by JCB founder Sir Anthony Bamford, and Lady Bamford, in January 2006 – just after Nic had been diagnosed as suffering from a rare form of leukaemia. Crucially, doctors allowed him to make models for the bronze because the creative process increased his heart rate – though not enough to give him the strength to sculpt the huge plaster-cast original of the head himself. Instead, with his supervision, the form was "transcribed" by a skilled assistant, Richard Clark. Before taking its place on the Bamford's Gloucestershire estate, the sculpture is standing at Marble Arch, London. Very few who walk or drive past it will know that the Marwari breed was famous in India for centuries as the mount of the redoubtable Rajput cavalry. Nor will they



know that the Marwari's legendary reputation for bravery in battle, and for carrying their wounded masters to safety, had an extraordinary resonance for Nic Fiddian-Green.

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◁ three-inch layer of fresh plaster is laid onto each of the sections of the head.

This process creates the moulds to be cast by the Castle Foundry near Shrewsbury, using the 'lost wax' method. Here, the inner faces of the plaster casts are thinly, but very evenly coated in melted wax; once dry, the wax casts are carefully removed. These casts – almost exactly the shape and thickness of the plaster sections on Fiddian-Green's original in the barn – are thickly coated in a slurry of grit and silica known as grog. Then they're fired in a kiln, the grog hardening into a tough ceramic shell, from which the heated wax drains through tubes. The final step is to pour molten bronze, at 1200degC, into the grog shells. Once the metal has cooled, the shells are smashed off – and bronze copies of the sculptor's original forms emerge.

"When you go to the foundry, it's almost medieval," says Fiddian-Green. "The guys are working in a way that hasn't really changed for 4,000 years. And this is going to be a one-off. *One thing. This is it.* There's an extra quality about the one, a gravitas. You throw the mould away! It's the original, the master." A new, and

rather edgy, kind of original in this case: Fiddian-Green's never worked, virtually solo, to this scale before.

But no matter, he's on a roll now. "Every line and shape is the original mark, not a copy. I've just come back from Egypt – the pyramids. Their figurative work is so *right*. Why? Because they believed in a folly that *was* the afterlife. And the execution of the hieroglyphics! They so understood the importance of the *line* and proportion. And I just stood there and thought: how beautiful.

"We should be proud of what we do. We should work to create good things. It's a short life, but we have the capacity to take stuff out of the ground and create great objects. I could ship the moulds off to China and have this head cast in bronze at half the price. But it's *paramount* that this sculpture is beautifully made. I know these guys in Wales, and I trust them. This is not just heavy metal. It has to have a fragility to it."

His wife, Henrietta, sporting a chic burnt sienna tweed jacket, arrives with mugs of coffee. "This is what I really love," she says quietly, touching a small, bronze horse's head

standing on one of the worktables – it's the maquette, or model, on which the giant head is based. "This was the first thing that Nic made that proved he was well again. It's iconic."

And this is quite a moment because Henrietta Fiddian-Green is referring, with barely concealed emotion, to her husband's touch-and-go recovery from serious illness, which made it impossible for him to sculpt until 2008, after more than two years of hospital treatment. "Yes, Henry's right," he grins, touching the maquette. And then he flings his arms wide: "That's me, back from the dead! I'm just a guy doing his thing, moving through time." Though obscured, no doubt, by the plaster dust in the barn, the ghost of St Hubert, the patron saint of metalworkers (and a very keen horseman) must have nodded knowingly.

Henrietta kindly offers to drive me to the station, and Nic sees us off. He notices me glancing at a Doors CD on the dashboard. "Great album!" he enthuses. "Go ahead, whack the sound *right* up!" I resist the temptation, as if I were suddenly John Betjeman, determined to protect the chaste Joan Hunter Dunns of Godalming. Instead, I silently recall four lines from one of Jim Morrison's poems, *Awake*:

*Choose the day and choose the sign of your day
The day's divinity
First thing you see . . .
Everything is broken up and dances.*

Picture it: a huge, bronze horse's head rising high above the turf on Trundle Hill at daybreak in June, close to the remains of the neolithic hill fort and causeway, and not far from the spot where 19th century locals believed Aaron's Golden Calf was buried. Now that really *would* make the sculpture a kind of divinity, wouldn't it? □

Jay Merrick is architecture critic of The Independent, and has written on art and architecture for Blueprint, ArtReview, New Statesman, and Art+Auction. This monumental sculpture is for sale and further work can be seen at the Sladmore Gallery, London W1; 0207 499 0365; www.nicfiddiangreen.com

