

# Oxfordshire

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Limited Edition  
incorporating **Intuition**

## Images of war

Why sculptor  
John Buckley is  
inspired by  
victims of  
conflict





Most Oxford residents are familiar with at least one of John Buckley's sculptures – the shark in the roof of radio presenter Bill Heine's home in New High Street, Headington, for example – but the artist would most like to be remembered for pieces inspired by his experiences in the developing world, most recently in Sudan.

He points to one in particular, called *Nuba Survival*, which has found a home on a hill at Hammonds Farm, Checkendon.

Unusually, John has spent the past two years working in his studio at Braziers Park, near Wallingford. Unusually, as the pages of stamps in his passports are testimony to the number of countries he has travelled to and lived in.

Most of us will do anything to avoid the danger spots of the world, but John seems drawn to them like a magnet.

A huge turning point in John's life came, in 1988, with a journey to an island – not a

## Sylvia Vetta discovers how Oxfordshire sculptor John Buckley's life has been transformed by travel and war

deserted one like ours – but to teeming Haiti. From then on the travel and the art, the two pillars of his life, fused and informed his work. But where did his complicated journey to our desert island begin?

He was born in Yorkshire in 1945.

"My parents Norman and Kathleen came south to work in the nuclear industry, first at Aldermaston and then at Culham and other places – so I changed schools a lot," John said.

"I did not really know what I wanted to do. The idea was that I study A-Levels at Reading Technical College that is until the day that I discovered the art department and found myself spending more and more time there. I knew right away that was what I wanted to do. My father Norman enjoyed drawing and, for as long as I can remember, I loved making things. But, at the time, I did not think of it as art. I was adept at finding a use for scrap materials."

John went to Berkshire College of Art and then to Winchester to do a National Diploma in Design (NDD).

"It was a time of upheaval in the provision of art education and the course at Winchester changed midway through my time there. So, I transferred to Leicester to finish my NDD," he explained. "Most of the students there wanted to teach art but I knew for certain that I just wanted to make it. I was always drawn to sculpture. My inspirations were Constantin Brâncusi (a Romanian sculptor who trained initially as a carpenter and stonemason) and African art. A Brâncusi would be an inspiration on the desert island."

After art school John set about finding somewhere he could work as an artist.

"I was lucky, very lucky, because I was allowed to use a studio in Wallingford at a peppercorn rent," he said. "It was 1965 and, with minimal overheads, I could indulge in creating things and discover my wanderlust.

# Visions of conflict



From then on I travelled for at least three months of each year."

It started unexceptionally with North Africa and East Africa, Canada and the USA. Then John explored Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia and South America.

His adventurous spirit came to the fore in 1981, at a time of political unrest.

"Western governments were advising people not to go to Egypt, but I ignored the advice and spent three months there. Sometimes felt I had the pyramids and Valley of the Kings almost all to myself.

"Then I hitchhiked down the coast road. The Sahara there is black and dreary but the straight road had parallel yellow lines made, not from paint, but from maize spilling from the Band Aid lorries heading for the Sudan.

"Once I reached The Red Sea, there could not have been more of a contrast, beneath the

water it teemed with colourful wildlife."

In 1988, John planned a trip to Cuba, and booked the only flight available with Russian airline Aeroflot. But a huge earthquake in Armenia led to the cancellation of that flight.

John said: "I thought that I would try to get to Cuba from Miami, but once in Florida, discovered that was impossible, so I headed for Haiti instead.

"I arrived in the middle of an attempted coup. The streets were piled with rotten rubbish and water, which at first I thought was sewage, pouring down the street. In fact it was clean water – the mains had burst, but were left unrepaired.

Customs at Haiti asked what my profession was and when I replied 'sculptor' they ordered a taxi saying: 'You must go to the Oloffson.'

"The hotel Oloffson was the inspiration for the Hotel Trianon in Graham Greene's famous





**John Buckley with  
his sculpture  
Nuba Survival at  
Hammonds Farm,  
Checkendon**

**Photograph:  
Antony Moore**

1966 novel *The Comedians*.

"I was a penniless artist used to living on a shoestring and suddenly there I was in five-star luxury while chaos reigned on the streets. I lived there for six weeks alongside aid workers, CIA agents, missionaries, dubious ladies, drug dealers and journalists.

"During the day I headed for the ghettos and the markets, where I sat down, observed and sketched what I saw. In places like that, people are suspicious of cameras but if you start drawing no one bothers you.

"Evenings at the Oloffson felt like sanctuary, and yet it was a bizarre place – a kind of gingerbread house with shutters, ceiling fans, marble floors and rooms decorated with bronzes and paintings. I was seeing opposites: decadence and luxury, poverty and disease.

"That experience became the inspiration for my life and my art," John said. "I realised that

the majority of the world's population do not live comfortable western lives but are stuck in deprivation while looking on at islands of untold riches.

"The painter, Edouard Duval-Carrie, showed me another aspect of Haitian life – voodoo ceremonies. All this had a profound impact on me and, on my final day, I mounted an impromptu exhibition in the hotel.

"The bourgeoisie would have bought them all, but I wanted to have something to show when I got home. But two sketches chosen by the manager settled my hotel bill."

John's Haitian pictures were shown in *What's up Doc?* at Modern Art Oxford in 1989. You can also see them on John's website.

By this time, John was married. He met his Dutch wife, Ineke, in England.

After spending some time together in Holland, they married and their first son,

Alexander, was born in 1979.

Soon afterwards John wanted to give Ineke and their baby a safe taste of adventure. They set off for the second smallest Canary Island, the sparsely populated La Gomera.

John recalled: "It is only accessible by ferry and then there is just one bus a day heading north where it is densely wooded with deep ravines and peaks almost permanently shrouded in clouds and mist. The only tourists were a group from Berlin."

Out of this experience came *Embrace*, a sculpture which Radio Oxford presenter Bill Heine made his desert island choice.

The inspiration for *Embrace* was personal and political. Life with a baby on this inaccessible island was loving but claustrophobic.

From the German tourists on La Gomera he

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**John Buckley with a model of his sculpture for the Paralympics, *Bladerunner***



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learned how isolated Berlin was during the Cold War years. John thought the emotions inspired by *Embrace* meant it was perfectly-suited to stand near the Berlin Wall.

Alexander, now 33, has set up his own successful theatre production company, lives in Brighton and was married in June this year.

John's second son, Antony, was also developing a career in art until his life was tragically cut short in 2006, aged 22, after a bout of mental illness.

When I met John, he was preparing an exhibition of Antony's work to put on display at Alexander's wedding reception, held at Braziers Park, so that his brother's presence could be felt at the celebrations.

Also at the wedding was John's daughter Olivia, 21.

Just before Antony's birth, John had another life changing encounter. He attended a meeting in Oxford Town Hall where he learned about the devastating effect of landmines and of how Cambodia was the worst effected country.

Peter Carey, an academic from Trinity College, was involved in The Cambodia Trust and suggested John go to Cambodia and work rather like a war artist. Not one to turn down a challenge, in 1991 John took on the assignment to go to Cambodia – which had just been invaded by Vietnam – where Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge was still fighting.

"Although The Cambodia Trust wanted me to work as an artist I was technically listed as journalist," said John.

"My hotel in Phnom Pehn was full of Russian advisors, but it was not like the Oloffson. It was not a refuge. The corridors were full of rats as big as cats.

"Outside was pure misery with people pouring in from the countryside with limbs blown to shreds by landmines. I struggled with how to connect with the carnage all around me – there was no let-up.

"I was allowed to go anywhere I wanted, so I headed for Angkor Wat, and watched as tracer bullets lit up the night sky over the huge,

*"The Vietnamese gave me poignant photographs of hundreds of Pol Pot's young victims. I felt at a loss as to how to use them. I came away with one feeling, one image, the agony of the limbless."*

haunting and abandoned Hindu temple complex. The bullets came from the Khmer Rouge fighters nearby.

"The Vietnamese gave me poignant photographs of hundreds of Pol Pot's young victims. I felt at a loss as to how to use them. I came away with one feeling, one image, the agony of the limbless."

"I decided to base myself in a hospital where they fitted prostheses for people who had lost limbs. Victims came in hobbling on improvised

limbs they had made from waste materials. Once the new limbs were fitted, the homemade ones were discarded. I asked to buy them and then brought them back to England."

Once back in England, John struggled emotionally to handle the images etched indelibly on his mind.

Help came in the form of an early meeting of The Mines Advisory Group (MAG) in the Quaker Hall, St Giles, Oxford. The founders were soldiers with experience of disabling mines. MAG was co-founding the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and encouraged John to mount a touring exhibition inspired by the items he had collected in Vietnam.

A friend, Kate O'Brien set about raising the funds and organising the tour.

The first venue was at St James's Church, Piccadilly, in June, 1997. His metal sculpture, called *The Warrior*, was used on the poster. The exhibiton travelled to venues around the country, including Coventry and Canterbury Cathedrals, before eventually arriving at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum in 2004. One of the pieces, called *Guardian Lions of Angkor Wat*, made from barbed wire, was bought by Trinity College.

John, who is now a patron of MAG, said:

"It took me six years to make sense of the living nightmare. I saw the bits of flesh thrown out of the window by the doctors – making their own living monument to the horror that landmines create. It changed the way I see people."

"The war in the region is not over – the

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– the secret war continues with the landmine legacy.

"For children, going out to play often means losing a leg. Working in the fields is a gamble. One of these small mines may be silently easing its way to the surface to explode."

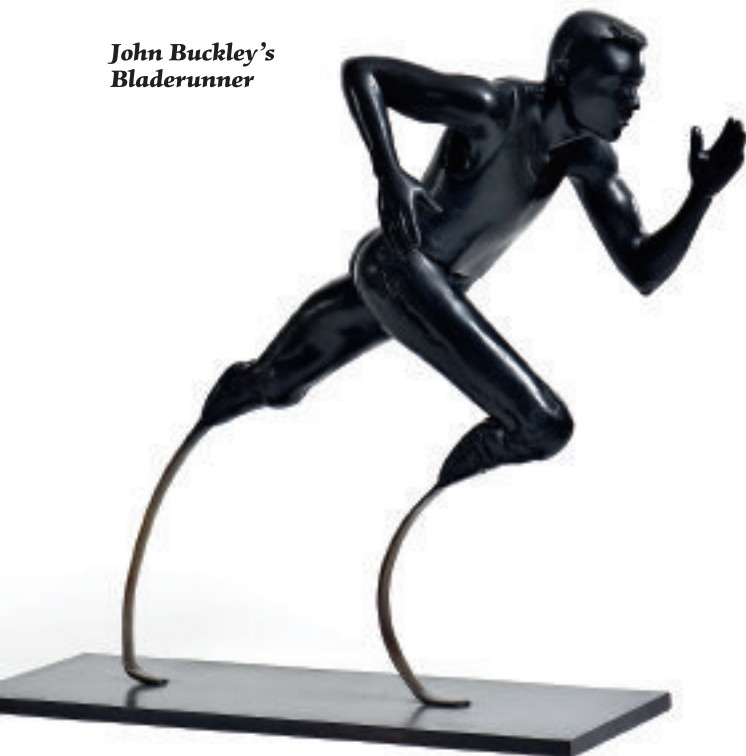
His desire is that his sculptures raise awareness – and hopefully see an end to the production of landmines.

"It took me four-to-five years making that exhibition, and it gets to you – you need an escape."

John also created an anti-war memorial for MAG and was proud when, as part of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, MAG was co-laureate of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.

Around this time, John and Ineke separated.

### **John Buckley's Bladerunner**



John headed for war-torn Sudan, where he became involved in the conflict between the north and south of the country, specifically the struggle for survival of the Nuba people, who, John believes, are threatened with genocide.

Nuba is a collective term used for the people who inhabit the Nuba Mountains in southern Sudan. Although the term is used to describe them as if they composed a single group, the Nuba are multiple distinct peoples and speak different languages.

John said: "On my second trip to the Sudan, I went with film-maker Alison Hobbs. I learned never to take water for granted. She filmed women spending seven hours-a-day to get just a little water to keep their families alive. They balanced 20 litres of water on their heads in temperatures reaching 40°C and carried it for over three hours.

"There are virtually no roads in Sudan – you have to walk everywhere. But I came across some beautiful places, too. The Giant Rocks in Nuba Mountains are like an immense sculpture."

"The results of 30 years of civil war are people who have nothing, but somehow keep their dignity."

John was able to live alongside them and survive. He admires their ability to live under such pressure but despairs that the world ignores their plight. His sculpture, *Nuba Survival* is unforgettable – it is harrowing, beautiful and huge.

Three years ago Art on the Edge, an organisation that aims to celebrate outstanding sporting achievement, inspire young people and to deliver art to a wider audience, approached John to produce something for an exhibition of sculptures for the Cultural Olympiad. They had seen his landmine installation and asked him to create sculpture inspired by the Paralympics.

Researching the project, he learned about South African athlete Oscar Pistorius, who became the first amputee to win an able-bodied world track medal. Oscar will be competing in the individual men's 400m and 4x400m relay at the London Olympics.

John came up with a bronze called *Bladerunner*. For inspiration, he drew not just on sporting triumphs, but also on his experience during those three harrowing months in Cambodia.

"I have been involved in representing victims of landmines for 20 years," John said.

"*Bladerunner* captures human ability at speed with allusions to the crippling devastation that mines inflict on their victims. Working on *Bladerunner* was a delightful contrast. It helped me escape some images from the Sudan."

John's *Bladerunner* will be on display during the Olympics at

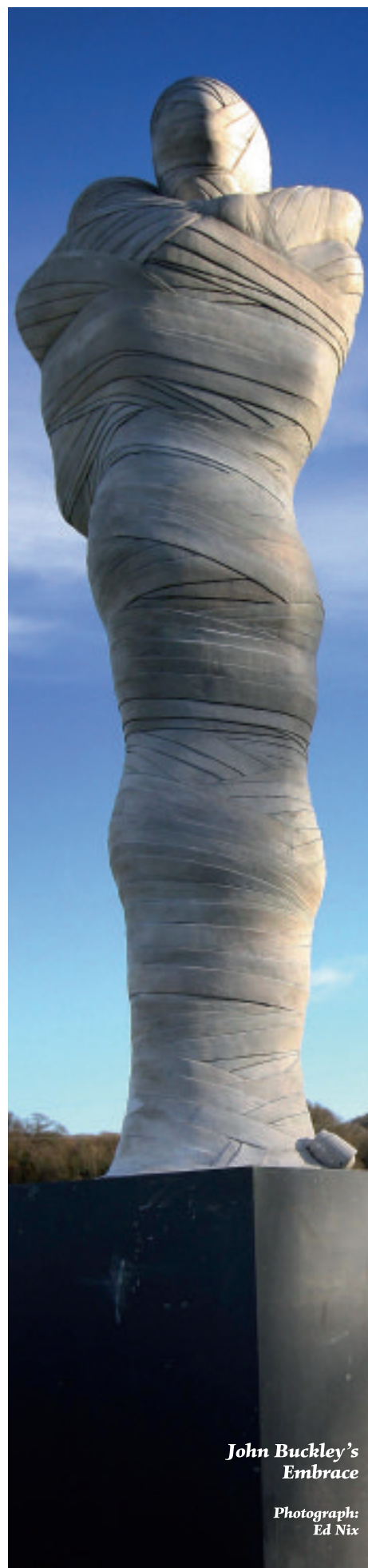
Gallery@oxo, Oxo Tower Wharf, on London's South Bank, until August 12.

Apart from the Brâncusi and the Nuba mountains, we had not talked much about this artist's choice for our island.

"I took my sons Antony and Alexander on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela – and some works of art from there could be a possibility," John said.

"I also love African sculpture, but I think I might choose a Lamborghini. On the island without roads it would be completely useless but I will admire its engineering and technology as well as its beauty. It could be useful to sit in to shelter from the rain."

■ For more information visit the websites:  
[www.johnbuckleysculptor.co.uk](http://www.johnbuckleysculptor.co.uk)  
[www.maginternational.org.uk](http://www.maginternational.org.uk) and  
[www.nubasurvival.com](http://www.nubasurvival.com)



### **John Buckley's Embrace**

Photograph:  
Ed Nix