



Clockwise from left: Post Punk, Excess, Mod Rock, Night & Day
All images by James Gilham



ArtScene

by CAROL CORDREY - carol@artalone.com

GUY PORTELLI

British music icons inspire modern pop art in the *Dragons' Den*

Guy Portelli admits to always having been “a wild child”, but after thirty years as a sculptor and becoming a respected member of the Royal Society of British Artists and the Royal British Society of Sculptors, he made his wildest move of all by entering BBC television’s *Dragons' Den*. He didn’t just survive, he received a roar of approval from the dragons for his innovative pop icon sculptures which will be in a selling exhibition at London’s Mall Galleries this month.

Artists are not renowned for their business acumen, but with Guy Portelli the dragons were confronted by a very different animal. He prepared his business plan and pitch with extreme care, knowing that his work would be rated by the dragons in front of six million viewers, including fellow artists.

“I knew that if I went into the Den, I had to win,” he reflects.

Failure to win their support would have ruined his artistic reputation as well as his long-held dream of sourcing funding for creating these distinctive, high quality sculptures. They represent a fascinating crossover between art and music which Guy first conceived about thirty years ago while studying at Kent’s Medway College of Design, “I made my first one when I was seventeen, combining sections of John Lee Hooker seated on a chair and playing his guitar. I made other musicians too and they were hugely popular but expensive to create,” recalled Guy.

He stifled the dream until about a year ago when he awoke on Easter morning and decided to present his concept inside the



Dragons' Den. Within a mere four weeks of applying, Guy found himself on the programme. Standing by his sample, life-size, pop icon sculpture he asked for an investment that he had calculated would cover the cost of the project and that the dragons would be willing to part with. It proved to be such a winning formula that viewers saw the dragons competing for Guy!

“He was *very* focused and knew his market. We’ve invested in Guy and just let his creative genius flow”, recounted Peter Jones with genuine delight.

Duncan Bannatyne however, was stunned when Guy declined his higher offer of £90,000 in preference to £80,000 jointly provided by Theo Paphitis, James Caan and Peter Jones – an investment triumvirate that Guy considered ideal.

Needless-to-say, Guy left the den a very happy man; but wanting the dragons to feel they had bought into the project emotionally as well as financially, he asked them to name their music icons. As a result, Led Zeppelin (for Peter Jones) and Elton John (for James Caan) will be among the show’s eighteen sculptures produced in various editions.

All of them show the characteristics and symbols of the respective musicians, for example, *Imagine* incorporates John Lennon’s trademark, circular glasses, and the striking, mixed media *Night & Day* recalls both Sinatra’s song and his associations with the Mafia through playing cards, casino chips and a gun.

The troubled but talented singer, Amy Winehouse, is wittily portrayed in burlesque style in *Excess* whilst two of the other pieces in Guy’s new body of work look set to become his own iconic sculptures: *Mod Rock* is full of the energy and colour of The Who’s dramatic stage performances when legs leapt around the stage; and *Post Punk* is a stunning recreation of the *Sex Pistols*, whose controversial rendition of ‘God Save the Queen’ connects with the sculpture’s form of a defaced Royal Mail stamp.

In stark contrast, *Rocking Chair Blues* is pared down to the essential features of the late John Lee Hooker’s rhythm tapping feet, heavy lips and downcast eyes of his doleful blues performances. James Caan’s admiration for Guy Portelli’s work is clear: “We’ve invested in something we’d all love to own ourselves,” he beamed enthusiastically. “And I’ll definitely do another of Guy’s shows.”

Ensuring that the exhibition will be a defining and all-embracing celebration of the genre, Guy has invited others to exhibit their pop icon work alongside his.

The Mall Galleries’ walls will be hung with photographs, paintings and prints by luminaries such as Terry O’Neill, Albert Watson and Sir Peter Blake RA; and in an intriguing twist, prints by a pop icon who became an artist – the late John Lennon.

It took thirty years and three dragons to breathe fire into Guy’s concept but Theo Paphitis feels the timing is unquestionably perfect: “Guy’s work provides optimism in a time of gloom, and quality art in a time of diminishing assets.” The story of this “wild child” looks as if it is going to have a well-deserved, fairytale ending. ■

Heart Throb: the golden age of the pop icon

25 June – 3 July
Mall Galleries
17 Carlton House Terrace
The Mall
London SW1Y 5BD
www.mallgalleries.org.uk
Tel: 020 7334 3922