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Taking Flight

Six years ago, sculptor Kate Denton was given a terminal cancer diagnosis and three months to live. As she tells Alice Ryan, her latest exhibition – *Burning Ambitions*, sparked by the Icarus myth – celebrates the life she came so close to losing

“If you live your life in fear, you’re not really living at all. Be brave. Make wings. Jump off the cliff. That’s what I’d like people to take away from this show.”

Sculptor Kate Denton is talking about *Burning Ambitions*, her solo exhibition which – spanning bold bronze work, life-size charcoal drawings and delicate, detailed lithographs – opens to the public this month. It’s inspired by Icarus, the mythical boy who flew to the sun on waxen wings, only for them to melt, plummeting him to earth.

A “celebration of the human condition, from its frailties to its strengths”, the idea came to Kate as she recovered from cancer; having been given a terminal diagnosis and 12 weeks to live, her fight with the disease took her right to death’s door.

“I can still remember walking out of the hospital and thinking ‘Right, that’s it then. It’s over. I’ll never see another spring or another snowfall,’” says Kate. “Yet here I am – and I’ve seen both.

“Like Icarus launching himself into the air, cancer is a leap into the unknown. People say I’m brave, but I’m not. I’m just really glad to be here. That’s what the exhibition’s about: it’s a celebration of life.”

Based at Lavenham Hall, home to her studio, one of her two galleries and a glorious sculpture garden, Kate started to feel ill not long after relocating to Suffolk from London.

“We’d been visiting the area for 25 years and loved it and this place was perfect. But I was feeling dreadful, totally exhausted. I put it down to moving. Yet, as time went on, I felt worse, not better.”

After a string of infections, Kate asked doctors to do a cervical smear: “By that point I was in a lot of pain and I really was convinced I’d got cancer. But – unbelievably, looking back – the test came back clear.”

Within a few weeks, woken in the early hours “by the most terrible pain”, Kate told husband Anthony “I’ll have to go to hospital or I’ll throw myself out of the window”. Once at Addenbrooke’s, tests confirmed it was cervical cancer.

At that stage, the prognosis was far from bleak: after chemo and targeted radiotherapy, Kate was given the all-clear. But within three months, the all-too-familiar exhaustion was back – and so was the cancer.

“They told me it had migrated, it was Stage 4 and there was nothing they could do. I couldn’t believe it: I thought ‘In 12 weeks’ time, I’ll be dead’. . . It’s a great blessing not to know when your time’s

going to be up.”

Kate and Anthony had planned a big Christmas, with their son, daughter, family and friends: “It was supposed to be a celebration of my recovery, but it ended up being a chance for people to say their goodbyes.

“In the end, I reached what I believe they call a ‘state of grace’. I was about two weeks away from dying: I was six stone and really, really ill. Then the phone rang.”

The call was from Addenbrooke’s oncologist Robin Crawford. He and his colleagues were offering a lifeline – in the form of radical surgery. “He told me that it might only give me another nine to 12 months, and that it would take me that long to recover. But I was about to die; I didn’t hesitate.”

An eviscerating 14-hour operation followed, removing Kate’s cervix, bladder and much of her bowel. “They took out everything they could, essentially. It’s



Burning Ambitions



Terra Firma



Kate in the studio

incredible when you think of it – that’s where the NHS is just awesome.”

Recovery was every bit as tough as the consultant warned. “I had to learn to walk again. I’d totter from the house to my studio on a zimmer frame and just sit there.”

Pre-diagnosis, Kate had built the armature for a life-size Suffolk Punch, a tribute to her new home county. “I was sitting there one day and thought ‘I can just about reach the knee’, so I got a wheelie office chair and started work, from the feet up.”

Working with plaster, Kate sculpted the horse inch by inch, “and didn’t think about the cancer at all. That horse really did help me get well”. By the time she’d reached the top, and the Punch was complete, Kate’s strength had returned “and I knew I was going to make it: in that moment, I knew”. It now stands, cast in iron resin, outside her gallery, testament to her death-defying achievement.

Art has long been at the heart of Kate’s life. Moving to the Channel Islands at 13, her talent was championed by Gerald Durrell, the naturalist and author of *My Family and Other Animals* – the autobiography which inspired hit TV series *The Durrells*.

A friend of her father’s, he saw Kate’s work hanging on the wall of the family home “and realised I was serious. So he gave me a free pass to his zoo, so I could visit whenever I wanted and draw. If he



Crouching Study, watercolour

spotted me, he’d come over and say ‘Yes, that’s good’ or ‘The legs need to be a little bit longer.’”

Born in Yorkshire, Kate says both her mother and grandmother were very artistic but “life in Yorkshire was pretty tough then. Art didn’t come into it”. Though her family supported her artistic ambitions, Kate says her father, a steel man, insisted on a back-up plan, “which is how I came to spend two years in a foundry as a welder”.

The job followed her time at

Goldsmiths, the acclaimed London art college, where, having experimented with all disciplines, a love of sculpture had taken hold. “So when I worked in the foundry, they let me cast my own work, which I carted round to galleries in a rucksack.”

A Holland Park gallery agreed to represent her, and so Kate’s career as a professional artist began. She met Anthony through that very gallery – he fell in love with a bronze of a leopard, then fell in love with its maker. The leopard now

On Reflection



stands in the hallway of Lavenham Hall.

Making a name as an animal artist, Kate's aim was always, she explains, "to go beyond representation, to capture movement, energy, something of the spirit. . .". Among her most memorable works – a life-size bronze of an orangutan, swinging through bamboo – was a commission for Durrell's zoo, made 10 years ago.

"I spent a summer there: I sculpted otters, meercats, tamarinds. . . Visitors could come and watch me work. The orangutans were lovely; the breeding male, Dagu, took quite a shine to me! The sculpture is of Gina, his favourite wife.

"But the gorillas didn't like me being there at all. They hate being stared at. Seeing me there with my sketchpad really aggravated one male in particular: there I was, focused on my work, and suddenly a clod of mud hit my pad – he was pelting me with handfuls of dirt. . ."

Though Kate has drawn dancers in the past, *Burning Ambitions* is her first major exhibition focused on the human form: drawing from life – both studio models and parkour runners were an invaluable resource – she's captured man in stillness, in flight, in falling. The works are amazingly diverse: as well as charting the full gamete of emotions, from joy to fear to despair, they vary hugely in form and finish – from



Kairos Study II

small to vast, flawless and mirror-shiny to deliberately flawed and rugged.

Kate's influences are every bit as eclectic: a Radio 4 interview that touched on Kairos, youngest son of Zeus and god of opportunity; Ted Hughes' seminal poetry collection, *Crow*; *Rag 'n' Bone Man's I'm Only Human* (which she played on loop while working, and inspired its own, self-titled, piece).

Burning Ambitions is dedicated to Robin Crawford and his Addenbrooke's colleagues, without whom Kate wouldn't be here. She's also indebted, she says, to the team at Bury's St Nicholas' Hospice, who, in her darkest days, supplied invaluable pain management and support; she and Anthony regularly open their garden in aid of the hospice.

Though she remains a regular visitor to

Addenbrooke's – as well as stoma checks, she suffers pelvic radiation disease – Kate is fit, well and looking to the future.

"I like throwing myself off cliffs – literally," she laughs. "We went to Kefalonia not long ago and, much to my poor husband's horror, I went off the cliff and into the sea. The exhilaration of it: that makes you feel alive.

"That's what I hope people will take away from the exhibition: a sense of what's possible, if you take that leap. . ."

Burning Ambitions runs at Lavenham Hall Gallery & Sculpture Garden from May 13 to 28, open from 11am to 5.30pm daily. Kate also has a gallery on Lavenham's High Street, open year-round, showing and selling her animal work. For more information visit katedenton.com.