

True to form

Feeling creatively unfulfilled by his job in the City, **Bruce Denny** signed up to a sculpture class. He discovered an immense passion for the art form, which he has translated into a highly successful career, writes Marie-Claire Chappet

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It's the quietest little village you will ever find. It's so spacious, peaceful and everything you need is right here on your doorstep. There is nowhere else like it." The sculptor Bruce Denny has recently returned from a sabbatical in the countryside but right now, he's talking about Belgravia.

Together with his husband and their four-year-old twins, Bruce has set up base in a stunning apartment in the area. It is peppered with art: an ornate, conceptual chandelier inspired by Dale Chihuly, a small Nick Fiddian-Green horse head and, of course, plenty of Bruce's own work.

The most interesting piece resides on a cabinet in his living room; a small reclining female cast in his signature bronze, which was the first he made in his first ever life-modelling class.

Bruce is clearly a monstrously talented artist. It's as obvious as his apartment is intimidatingly pristine, yet measured humility is a huge part of his temperament. You believe his sincerity when he says, "I always have been able to do anything I turn my hand to", and that the stunning sculpture on his cabinet was the work of a first-time sculptor, just as his artistic career – which only began in 2006 – has sky-rocketed with eye-watering speed.

Born in Ipswich in 1967, Bruce always knew he was not cut out for small-town life. "I lived in a very poor area and for most people their lot in life was just to go and work in the factories," he says. "I didn't want that. I thought the best way to get on to the career ladder was to study something very academic – that would be my best way to get out."

For him, that meant a science degree, followed by a long period of working in the City. Though it was always his intention to make it in London, he soon found it creatively stagnant. To fill the void, he joined an amateur dramatics group, performing opera, musical theatre and plays to the extent that he seriously toyed with the idea of becoming an actor.

It was a sculpting class at Morley College that convinced him otherwise. His rapacious appetite for the form soon began consuming his life, and he very swiftly found a studio space of his own to create and sell



his own work. "I didn't plan on it becoming anything," he says, "but I just took to it like a duck to water. It just so felt like what I should be doing."

The gamble absolutely paid off. In just over nine months, the former City boy had his own exhibition at HSBC private bank in Mayfair, swiftly followed by a residency at the Albemarle Gallery.

His first collection, titled *Humanity*, directly spoke to his career transformation, with pieces like *Dropping Out* and *Towing the Line*.

"There were lots of elements of working life in there, where you feel you are working and working and you don't get anywhere – always climbing the ladder and stepping on people along the way," he says. "Sometimes you want to remove yourself from that and start afresh."

The first collection was followed by *Interaction* and then *Mortality* – all of them discernible for their focus on guttural, stripped-back humanity. "They were all elements of humanity that were none of them based on race, religion, creed, mythology or anything," he explains. "I wanted to produce work that everyone could relate to."



Despite the scale and cost of his work (casting in bronze is enormously labour intensive), Bruce has a refreshingly democratic view of his art. "Public display is the most important thing about my work," he says, referencing his current display outside at Chewton Glen.

"It was clear right from the beginning that the general public really respond to my work but it is so often out of their price range, so I am very keen to have it in public spaces that everyone can access and enjoy."

One such piece is his sculpture of Sir Simon Milton, in Paddington. "You can actually sit down and interact with him. You can have your lunch sitting next to him. It makes the art much more interactive with the environment."

Another is his vast statue *The Conversion of St Paul*, probably his most high-profile commission to date. He was the only sculptor asked to create work to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Christopher Wren's St Paul's Cathedral. Exhibited for three months outside the iconic building, it is now in permanent residence in St Paul's Church in Covent Garden.

Just over 10 years ago, Bruce was sat at a desk with the day-to-day slog of data-processing at an insurance firm. Now he is creating life-sized statues for one of London's best-known landmarks. It is quite the transformation.

"I think there is a great value to coming to art later in life," he says. "You have a lot of life experience and you have a lot to say. Art is all about expressing those emotions and bringing out those emotions in others. I was so lucky to have had everything happen for me so quickly. I was absolutely delighted."

Now, day-to-day life is caring for his twins ("I love it. There's nothing better, I recommend it to anyone") with his magistrate husband who, as we speak, has taken them to nearby Belgrave Square Garden – a new favourite spot for the family. Soon he will return to his art, now that his brief sabbatical has run its course. As he discusses his work, his passion is abundantly clear – as is his eagerness to get back in the studio. And who can blame him? He's waited long enough.