

**READYMADE**

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**BY JOE BLACK**

OPERA GALLERY

## Foreword

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We are proud to present the Asian debut exhibition of contemporary British artist Joe Black. Black is best known for his large-scale works, accumulations of thousands of miniature objects portraying the transient nature of today's popular culture.

Highlighted works in the exhibition include solemn tributes to iconic figures such as Elvis Presley, the Queen of Hollywood and Princess of Monaco Grace Kelly, as well as political pieces such as the homage to Chinese artist and political activist Ai Weiwei. Joe Black specifically selects objects that pay tribute to the image they create, using industrial quantities of Lego pieces, plastic pins, plastic flowers and badges among others. While the installation of Ai Weiwei's portrait is comprised of thousands of plastic figures depicting the working class, it is challenged by a 4.5-meter installation of Communist leader Mao Zedong made of 20,000 plastic toy soldiers pointing their guns to his head, both alluding to the industrial history of the objects they are made of – all made in China.

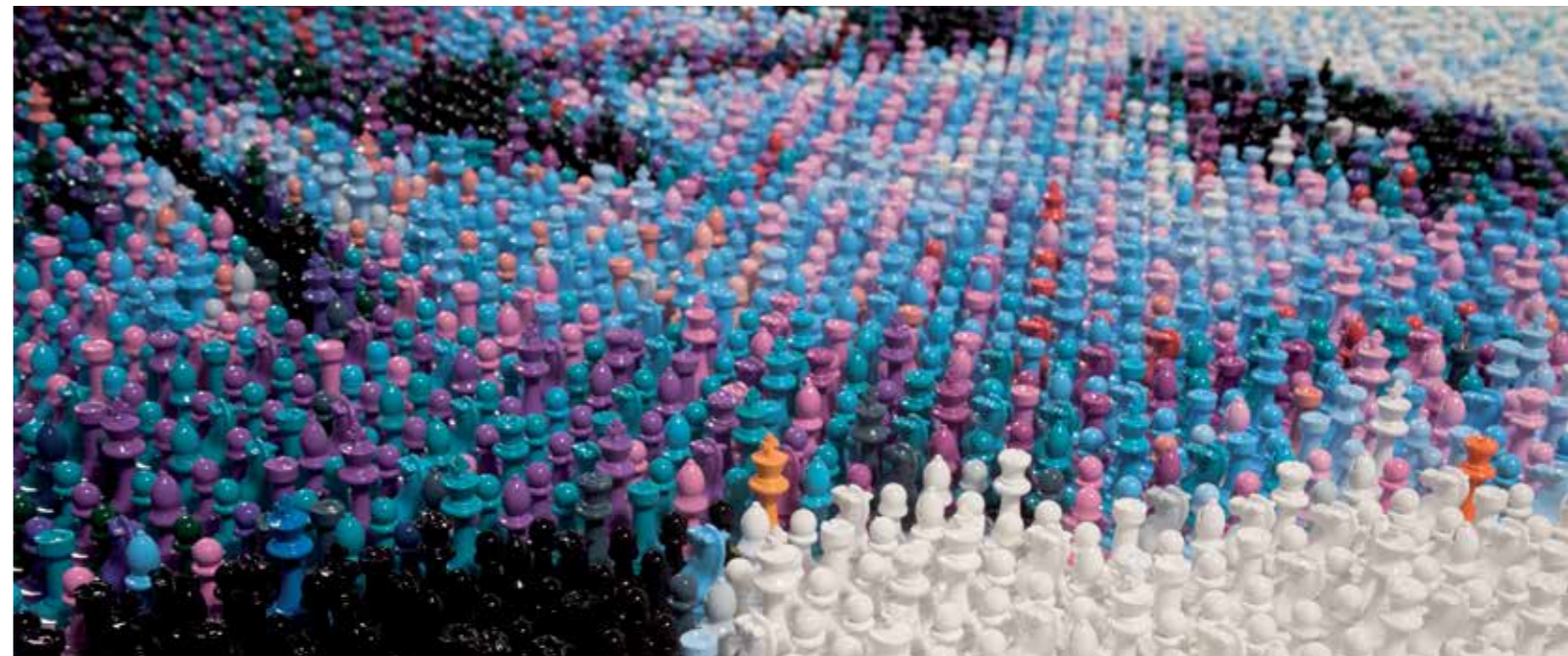
The title of the show - *Readymade* - pays tribute to 20<sup>th</sup> century artist Marcel Duchamp, a pioneer of the Dada movement who was a painter, sculptor, writer and chess enthusiast among his many endeavors. Duchamp invented the concept of re-defining/re-positioning/re-observing 'ready-made' objects as works of art using manufactured items such as a bicycle wheel, a porcelain urinal (which he famously titled "Fountain") or glass bulb (titled *50cc air de Paris* simply containing air from Paris). This distinction turned ordinary objects into unique works of art by the pure representation of the concept and nothing else.

Joe Black explores the relationship between art and object by creating monumental, ironic, and tongue-in-cheek compositions leaving the viewer in awe of both the scale and the detailed work involved.

Fascinated with the idea of making big things out of little things, a self-professed "love of materials" has led the 40 year-old artist to combine craft, technique and passion for perfection in creating these works using small everyday objects. Each work of art is an undertaking requiring months of painstaking assembly.

**Gilles Dyan**  
Founder and Chairman  
Opera Gallery Group

**Shirley Yablonsky**  
Director  
Opera Gallery Hong Kong





**You are preparing your first Hong Kong solo exhibition. Do you anticipate it will be different from your previous shows?**

**JB:** I hope it will be different from the other shows I've done. This is my first exhibition in Asia and it will be interesting for me to see how the show will be received. Obviously there are large cultural differences between Europe and Asia and I'm keen to see whether my choices of subject matter and materials work with the Hong Kong audience.

I've experimented with different objects for this show, which often throw up new challenges like how the objects will work together and the construction process. I plan as much as I can but there are always ways of problem solving as I work on a piece. Although the end result of the artwork looks ordered and precise, the working process is often organic with a degree of trial and error. For example, I completely re-painted Weiwei's portrait three times before I got it looking how I wanted.

**Do you think new technologies have had an influence on your work?**

**JB:** I am interested in new technologies and did a lot of research on 3D printing. It's incredible what these machines can do but the technology is still very much in the early stages and I think I'll have to wait 10 years until it can do what I want it to.

For me a large part of my work is craft and working by hand is an important part of the process. Replacing pixel units with objects gives a lot of scope to try different construction methods. How the artwork is built and objects are positioned together is a key part of the working process. Importantly, it's how the objects fit together that dictate the look and feel of the piece.

**Up close and far away are very important in your work. Do you try to create a new way of looking at an artwork?**

**JB:** Up close and far away is important in my artwork. I try to make both up close and far away work together. Obviously the viewpoint from afar has to be right or the portrait wouldn't work whereas for the close up I get more involved with the intricate flow of the objects and try to build more depth with layering each object and exploring how they work with one another. I've started to touch on this with the Big Mac artwork.

**Which artist do you admire most?**

**JB:** I admire all artists.

I think Grayson Perry explained it best when he was asked what he does. He replies '...Oh, I'm an artist. And they go, "it must be fun! What fun that must be – all that sculpting and art. Must be great fun!" And I go, "Imagine this... you have an exhibition and there's a big white room waiting for you to fill it. And in a year or two I've got to fill that with work and all the people are going to come and look at it, and then the press are going to come and they may want to write about it and talk about it, and then I've got to sell it, my income depends on it and also maybe the income of other people like assistants. And then on top of that, I've got to create it with a kind of carefree joy of a child". You know it's quite a tricky act to pull off. Art's quite a serious business really.' (Episode 4, I Found Myself in the Art World, *Reith Lectures*, BBC Radio 4, 2013).

**You often use porn images in your work. Do you feel they are a part of popular culture?**

**JB:** If you mean by popular culture, "Culture based on the tastes of ordinary people rather than an educated elite" then no. But if by popular culture you mean "activities or commercial products reflecting, suited to, or aimed at the tastes of the general masses of people". Then, yes maybe, possibly... it depends what part of the general masses you're from.

**Tell us of your working process. Do you start by choosing a medium and then imagine which icon you could match it with or vice versa?**

**JB:** It works either way. Although it is easier for me to have an object that interests me and then think about the subject matter or portrait, rather than selecting an image and saying I'd like to make it out of twenty thousand platinum encased diamonds, it just wouldn't be feasible. It's better that the idea grows from the objects into a theme or subject matter as there are some fundamental parameters to what I can and can't use, but I enjoy the challenge of trying to push these boundaries.

**What is your favorite mass product used in your artwork?**

**JB:** I love all my "mass product objects". It would be unfair to pick a favourite!

**Marshall McLuhan said that "the medium is the message". We feel that this perception can be applied to many of your artworks.**

**JB:** It would be hard for me to disagree with Marshall McLuhan. The materials do carry a message with the subject matter but I don't always go for an obvious connection between the subject matter and material. It works best for me when the artwork is perceived as humorous or tongue-in-cheek, but actually beneath that it carries a not so obvious dark sinister layer.

**It is commonly said that your work fluctuates between a tribute to artists and icons, and a sharp criticism of the consumer society they grew upon. Do you feel that those two elements are two characteristic themes of your work?**

**JB:** I'm interested in recognizable portraits and matching them with a material. I don't see it as a criticism nor do I mean it to be one. I see it as an observation. I purposefully leave the artwork and the art statement open to interpretation by the viewer.

I don't like to write art statements for my artworks for this reason. They are observations and I don't like to project a specific view as my work has layers and it is for the viewer to decide a meaning.

**Your portraits focus on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century icons. Are there any portraits you wouldn't create? Do you think your work sensationalizes these icons?**

**JB:** I think in the art world there is a fine line between sensation, the shock of the art and (bad) taste. The Beijing artist, Zhu Yu, really pushed that boundary with his performance at the Shanghai Arts Festival in 2000. Although I created a portrait of the Russian dictator, Joseph Stalin, I don't think I go that far.

There is no portrait I wouldn't do if I think it made sense regarding subject and objects. I'm careful about how the portrait is approached and take a long time finding the right imagery to use and only then if

there's an open connection with the objects. I've turned down quite a few direct commissions as they were quite specific about the objects and the iconic subject matter. I couldn't see a connection and it seemed that it would diminish my other works such as *Obama*, *Mao* and *Made in China*.

**One of your current works is the Chinese artist and architect Weiwei, also known to be a political activist in China. Could we say that representing him is a way to pay tribute to him?**

**JB:** If I do a portrait of another artist it is tribute or homage to that artist, whether I like their work or not (in the case of Weiwei I do like his work) it is not why I choose to do another artist's portrait. It is more to do with the artist themselves and what they have done as an artist. Throughout art history, artists have always stolen and regurgitated ideas and subjects from other artists. It is an idea ingrained in the arts and is nothing new. I suppose you could say that reproducing artist's portraits and commenting on their work using objects within the piece is acknowledgement of this.

**Do current affairs play a part in your subject choice?**

**JB:** Yes, it could be a quote from the daily news that springboards an idea. If I'm honest I've occasionally been lucky with timing as the piece takes a long time to prepare but the news item that gave me the idea is often no longer current once the piece is finished. I was lucky with President Putin and President Obama's portraits as they both resurfaced as current affair items by the time the artworks were complete.

**Some of your works like *Outward* tend to be more abstract than Pop Art. Do you see yourself going down that path? Or do you think you're going to stick to the more figurative side of your work?**

**JB:** Personally, I think the *Inward* and *Outward* artworks are strong. Other artists have recognized them, which is always a good response, but commercially I'm not sure how well they were received. I would like to develop more abstract pieces in the future and play with the object, scale and colour.

**Are you going to work with other consumer's goods and mass-produced objects?**

**JB:** I'm planning a research trip to China next year as I would like to start manufacturing my own mass-produced objects.

**What will be your next challenge?**

**JB:** Finding someone that can mass-produce my own objects.

## Artist's statement

Through his work Joe Black explores the way we see pictures by making imagery that is both seen as a whole and as a collection of small composite parts. His aim is for the audience to experience the grand and the intricate at the same time. 'Close up' and 'far away' are important in Joe Black's work. Combining his craft skills, love of materials and an innate desire for perfection, the production process is intrinsic to his work. The final result for which he strives is a sense of wonder about how the pieces are constructed. His drive and inspiration for the work is very much about the process of making the pieces. The meticulous nature of the work is a necessity, and integral to the work. His choice of imagery comes from popular culture as easily recognizable, iconic portraits. However, in Joe Black's interpretation of the portrait, the merging of old and new technologies presents the subject in a totally new context. In an age of immediate digital media, Joe Black has intentionally created a time-consuming, alternative form of pixilation, assembled entirely by hand. His work evokes a sensory response where the audience is invited to look deeper than the surface of the work to reveal something unexpected. He selects small common objects to pay tribute to, or add another dimension to the subject of the piece he is making. By looking, the object materializes and gives expression to the personality of the subject, beginning the metamorphosis of the ordinary into something extraordinary. The objects signify hidden meanings within the work and although Joe Black has his own ideologies, whether personal, political or social, the work is left open to interpretation. Through the very act of seeing the images, the story within the work is revealed to the audience.



## Deep Blue

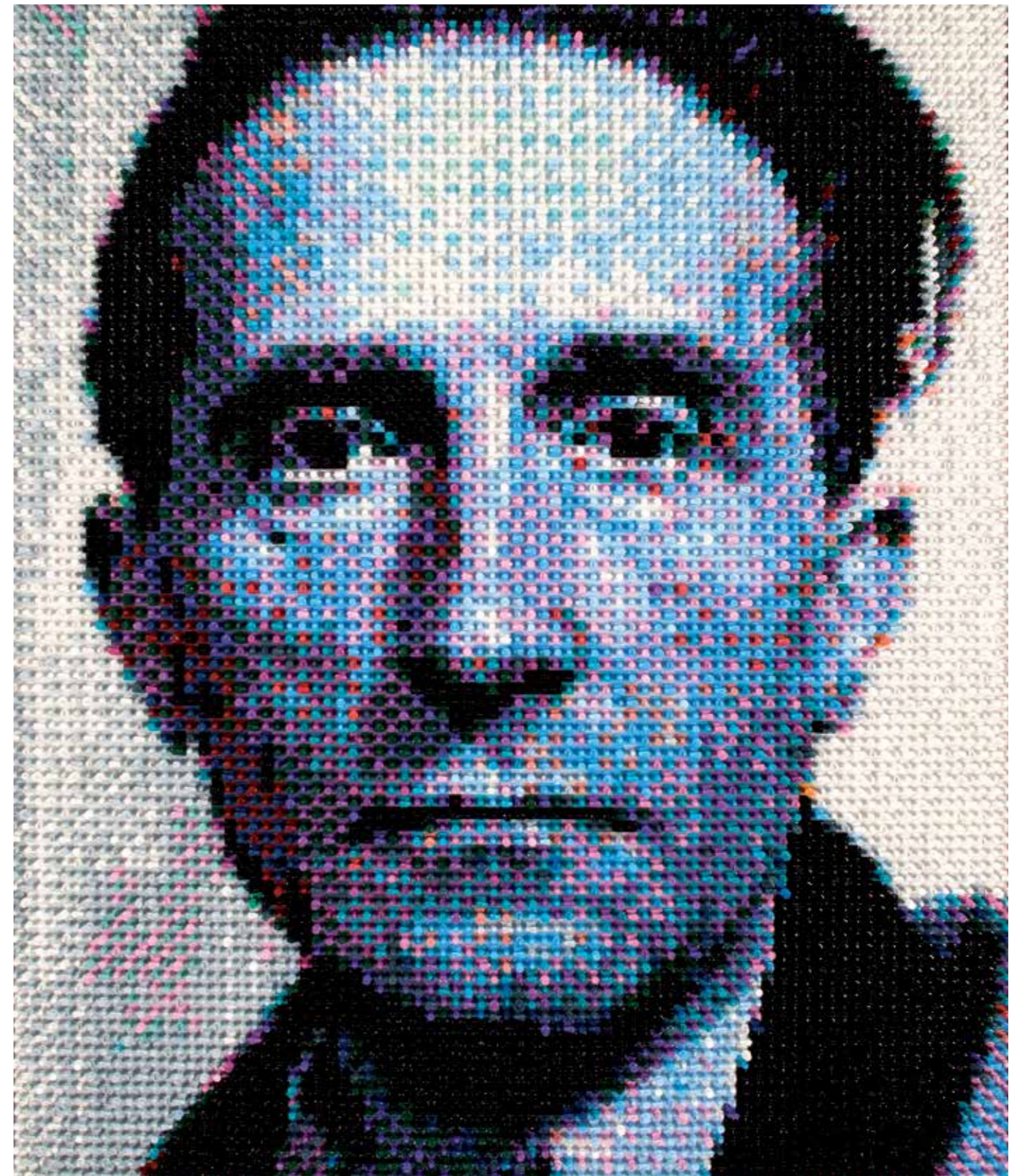
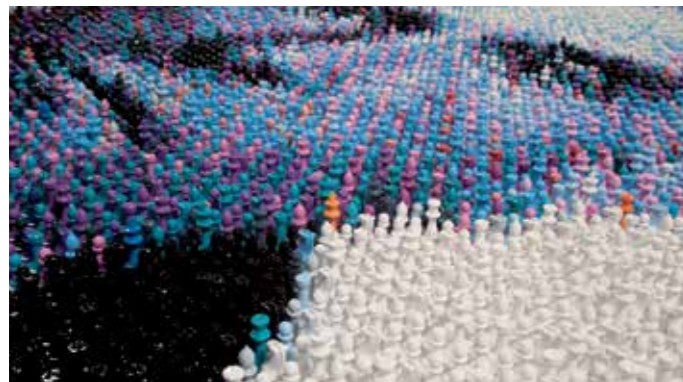
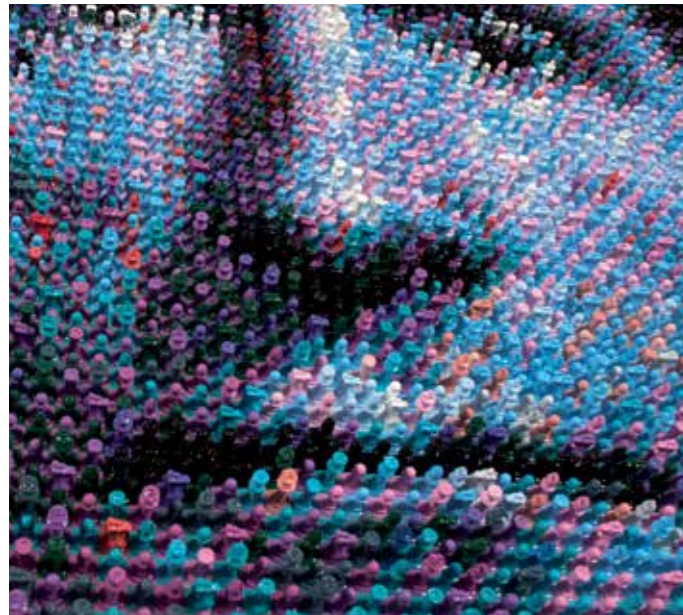
7,600 spray-painted chess pieces on aluminium  
with resin coating  
158,5 x 134,5 x 9 cm - 62.4 x 53 x 3.5 in.  
2014



King of the readymade, the pun and the leading intellectual mind of modern art, Marcel Duchamp's real passion wasn't to art, but to the oldest and most desirable of games - chess.

After opting out of the art world for a while in the 1920s for his other pursuit of the imagination, Duchamp's endgame was to check mate the conceptual artists of the era with his seminal and important pieces, which changed the way art was seen forever.

*Deep Blue* refers to the IBM supercomputer which was considered unbeatable. In 1997 Deep Blue won a six game match against Russian chess world champion, Garry Kasparov.



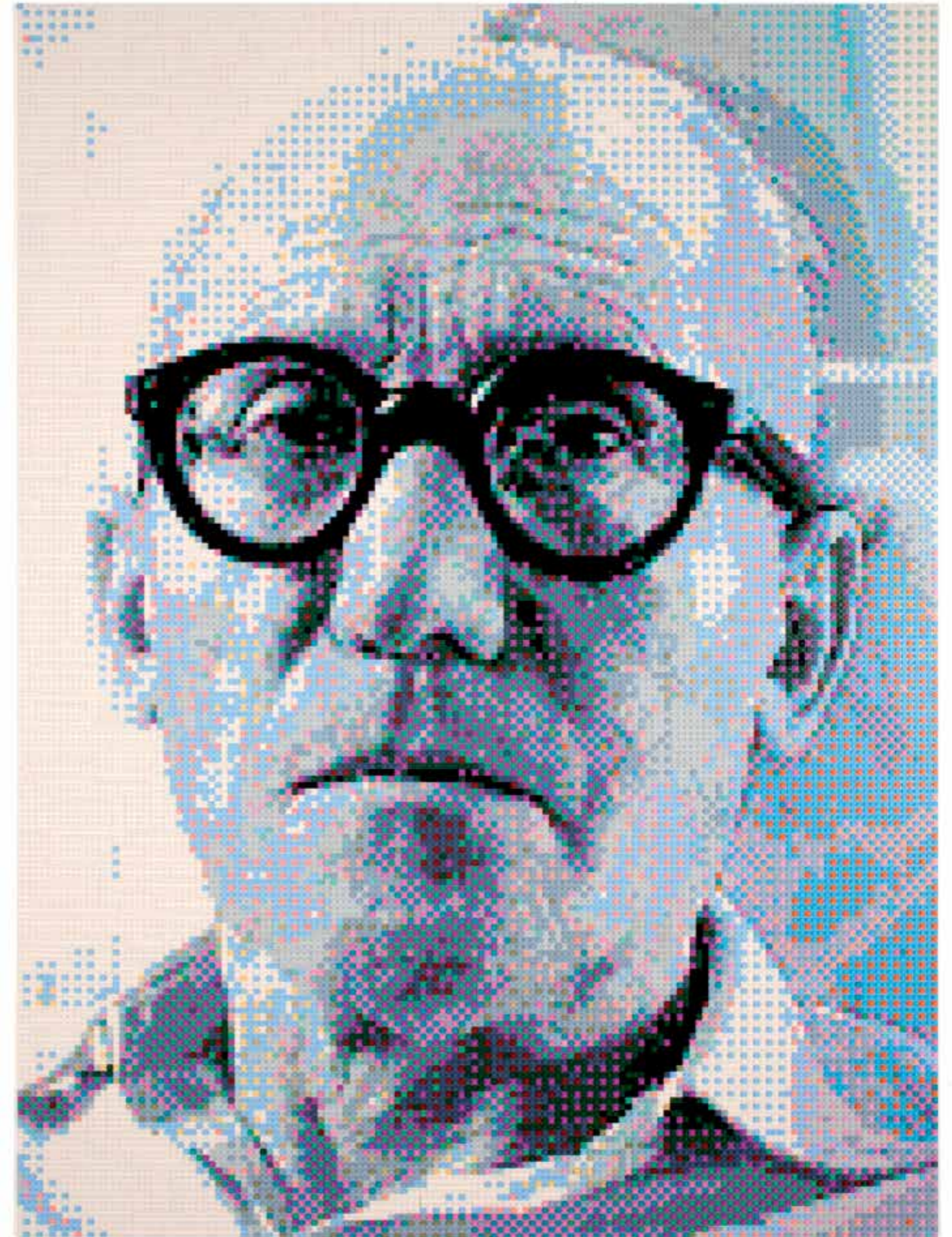
## Playing with Le Corbusier

14,848 spray-painted Lego bricks  
on aluminium  
185 x 146 x 6 cm - 72.8 x 57.5 x 2.4 in.  
2014



Le Corbusier said that "To create architecture is to put in order. Put what in order? Functions and objects".

His humanitarian vision of urbanisation shaped the cities of post-war Britain and moved architecture towards the mass production of concrete tower blocks. Reflected in the Lego bricks are the clean lines, order and simplification of style, which epitomise Le Corbusier's buildings.

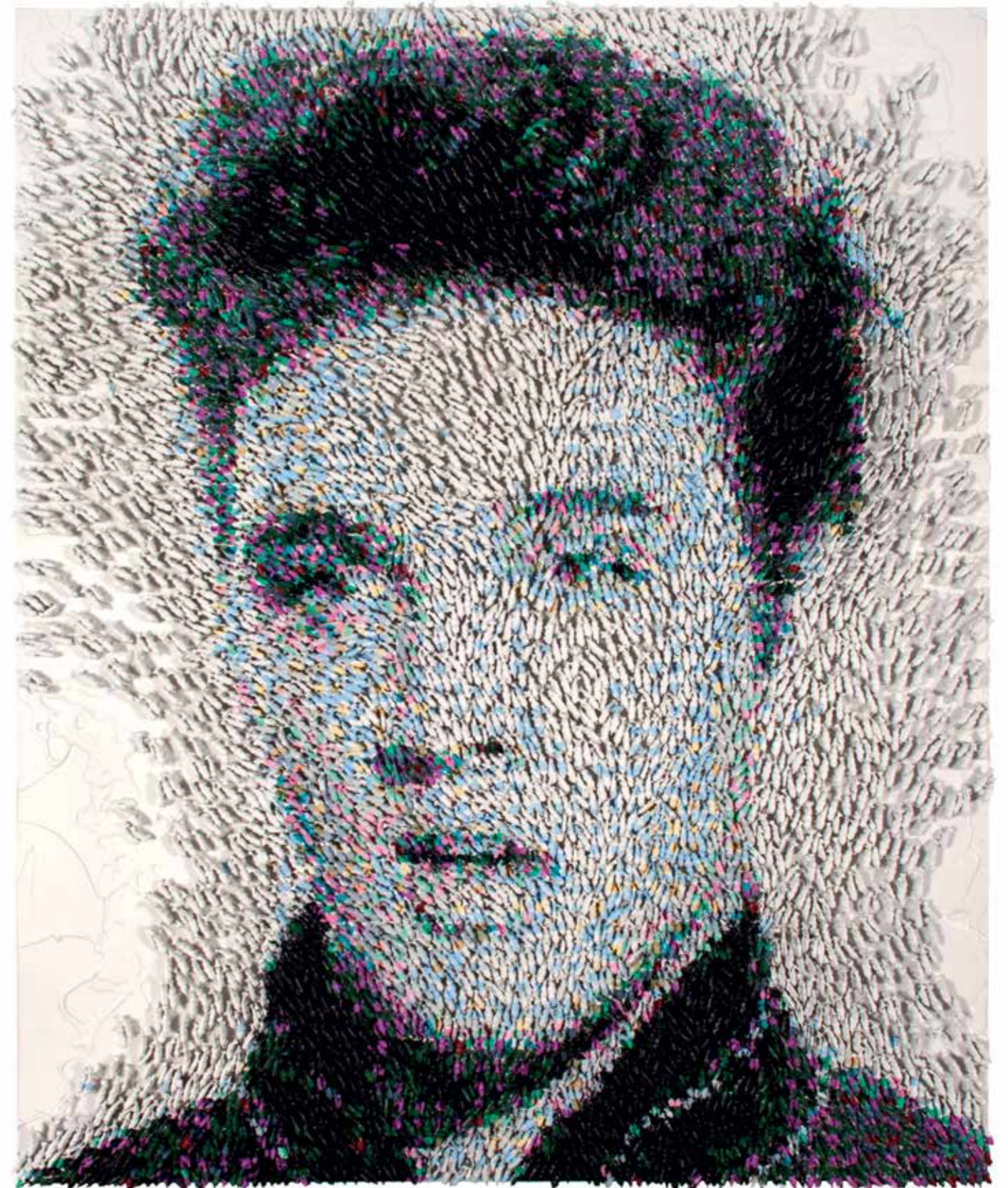


# Big Mac

8,000 hand-painted scale plastic cows  
on aluminium with resin coating  
130,5 x 110 x 7 cm - 51.4 x 43.3 x 2.8 in.  
2014



This work depicts the ultimate icon of pop culture and pop music: Elvis the King of consumption.

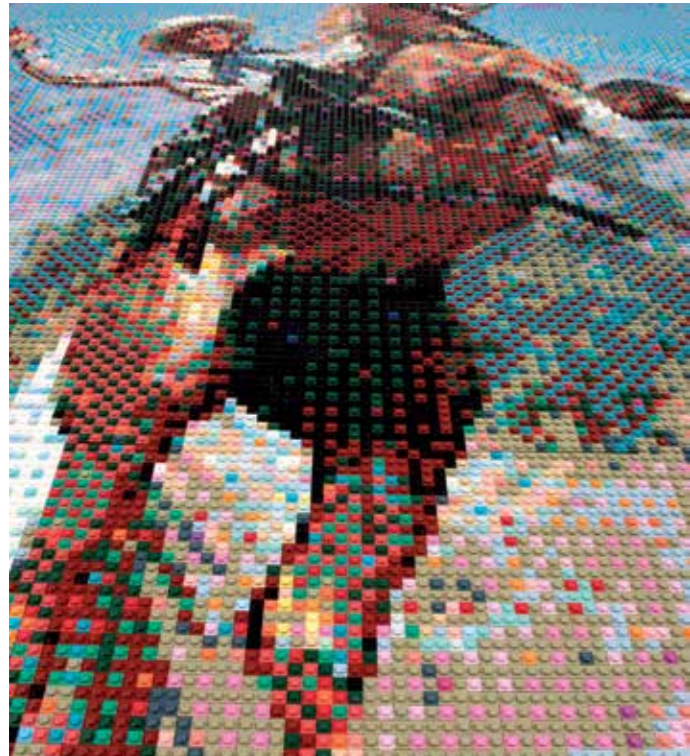


# War Horse

22,000 spray-painted Lego bricks  
on aluminium  
195 x 146 x 6 cm - 76.8 x 57.5 x 2.4 in.  
2014



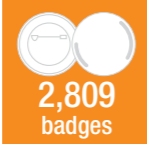
Celebrating the Chinese Year of the Horse, the romantic Western imagery portrayed of the horse and cowboy refers to the links between China and America, and the growing political and industrial power China has over the West, which is constantly building.





# The Rest is Silence

2,809 handmade badges depicting popular culture,  
set on aluminium  
157 x 157 x 6 cm - 61.8 x 61.8 x 2.4 in.  
2014



In the tradition of the Vanitas paintings of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, this work encapsulates the transient and temporary nature of popular culture and earthly pursuits, and ultimately life.



## Angels with Dirty Faces (beginning)

15,000 spray-painted plastic flowers on pearl tinted aluminium with resin coating

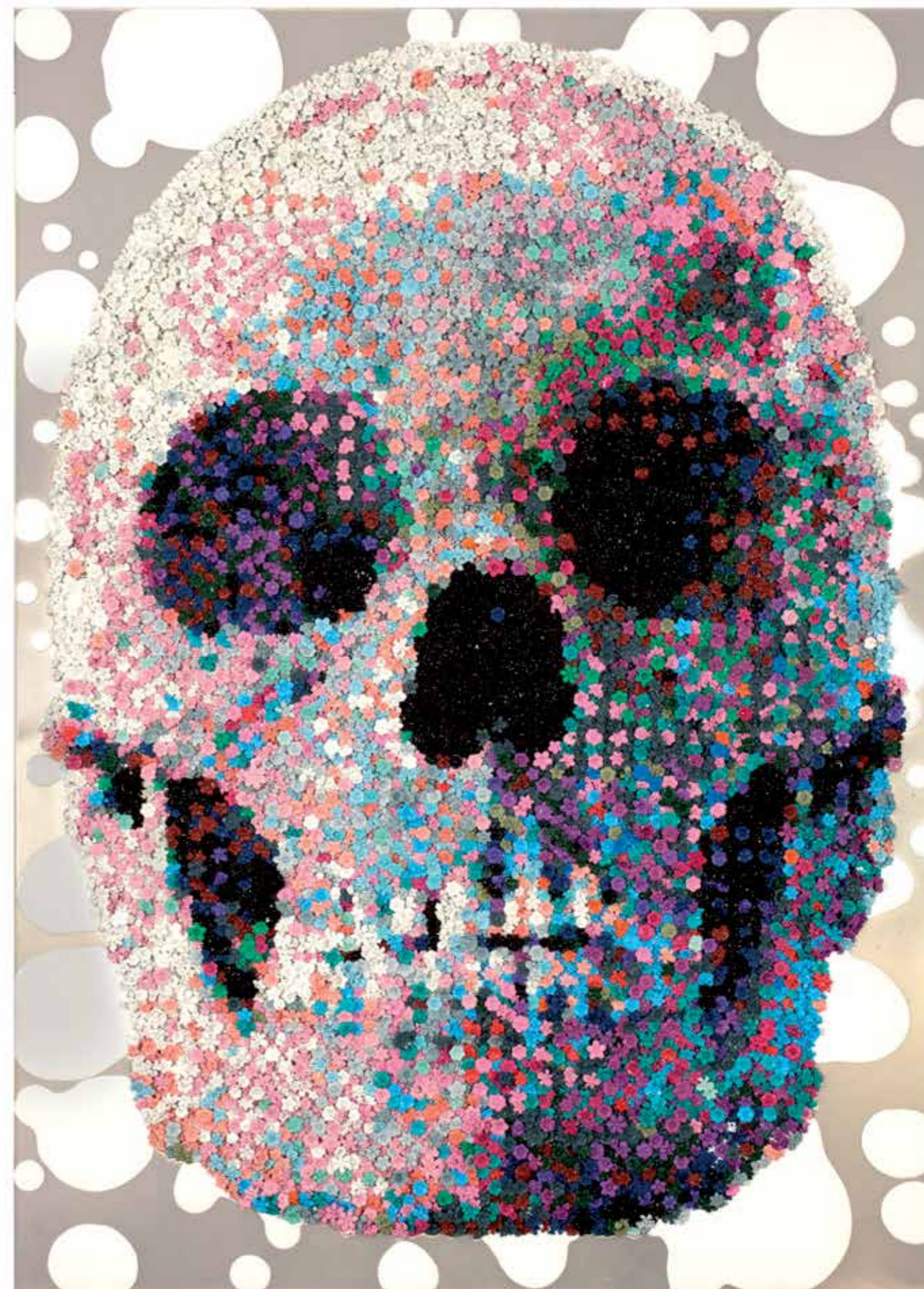
125 x 174,5 x 14 cm - 49.2 x 68.7 x 5.5 in.

2014



This work is a part of the triptych *Angels with dirty faces*.

Regeneration and renaissance are the underlying themes in these works. The symbolism within the works refers to the ephemeral and circular nature of life.



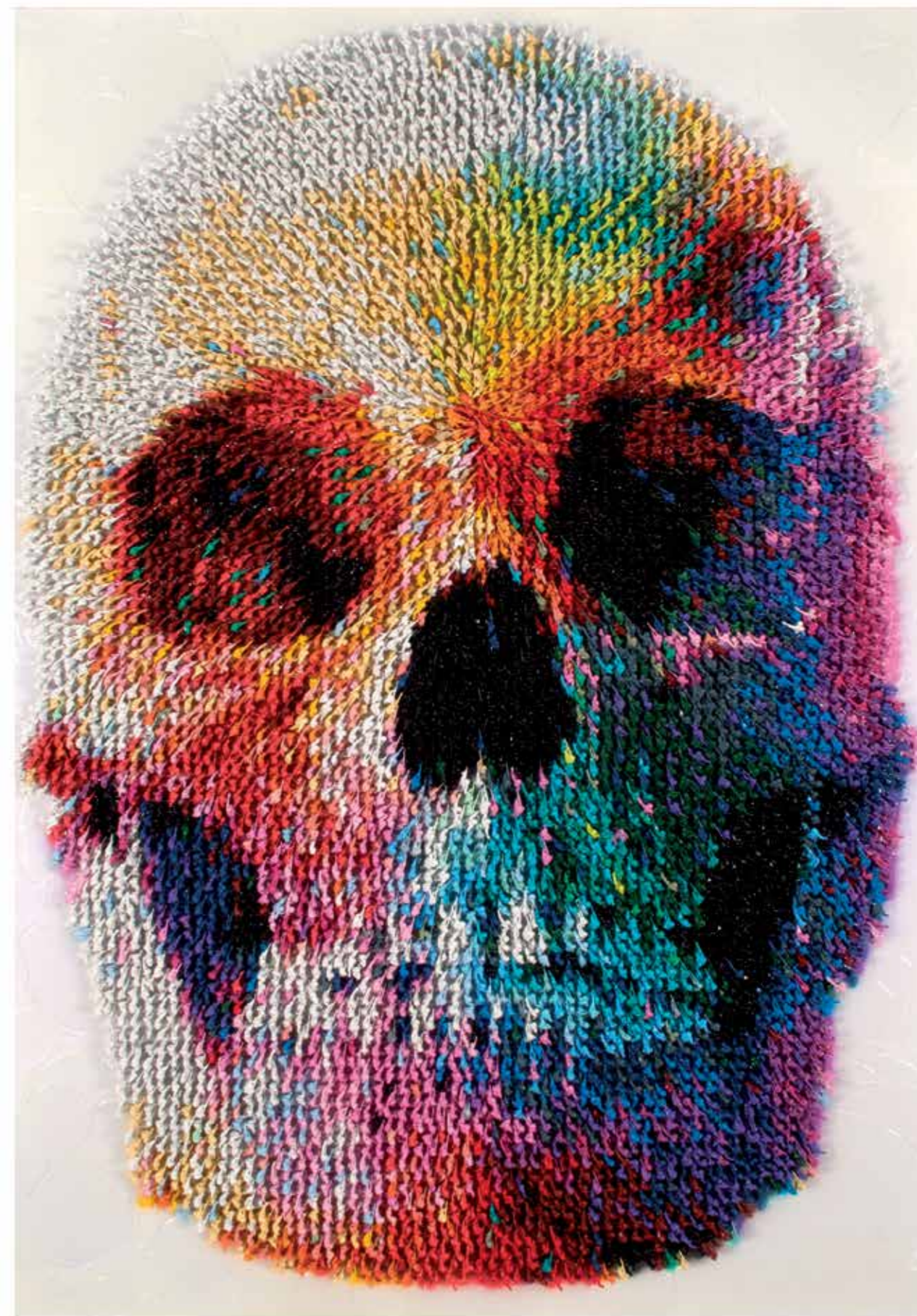
## Angels with Dirty Faces (middle)

8,000 spray-painted soldiers on aluminium tinted  
aluminium with resin coating  
185 x 132 x 10 cm - 72.8 x 52 x 3.9 in.  
2014



This work is a part of the triptych *Angels with dirty faces*.

Regeneration and renaissance are the underlying themes in these works. The symbolism within the works refers to the ephemeral and circular nature of life.



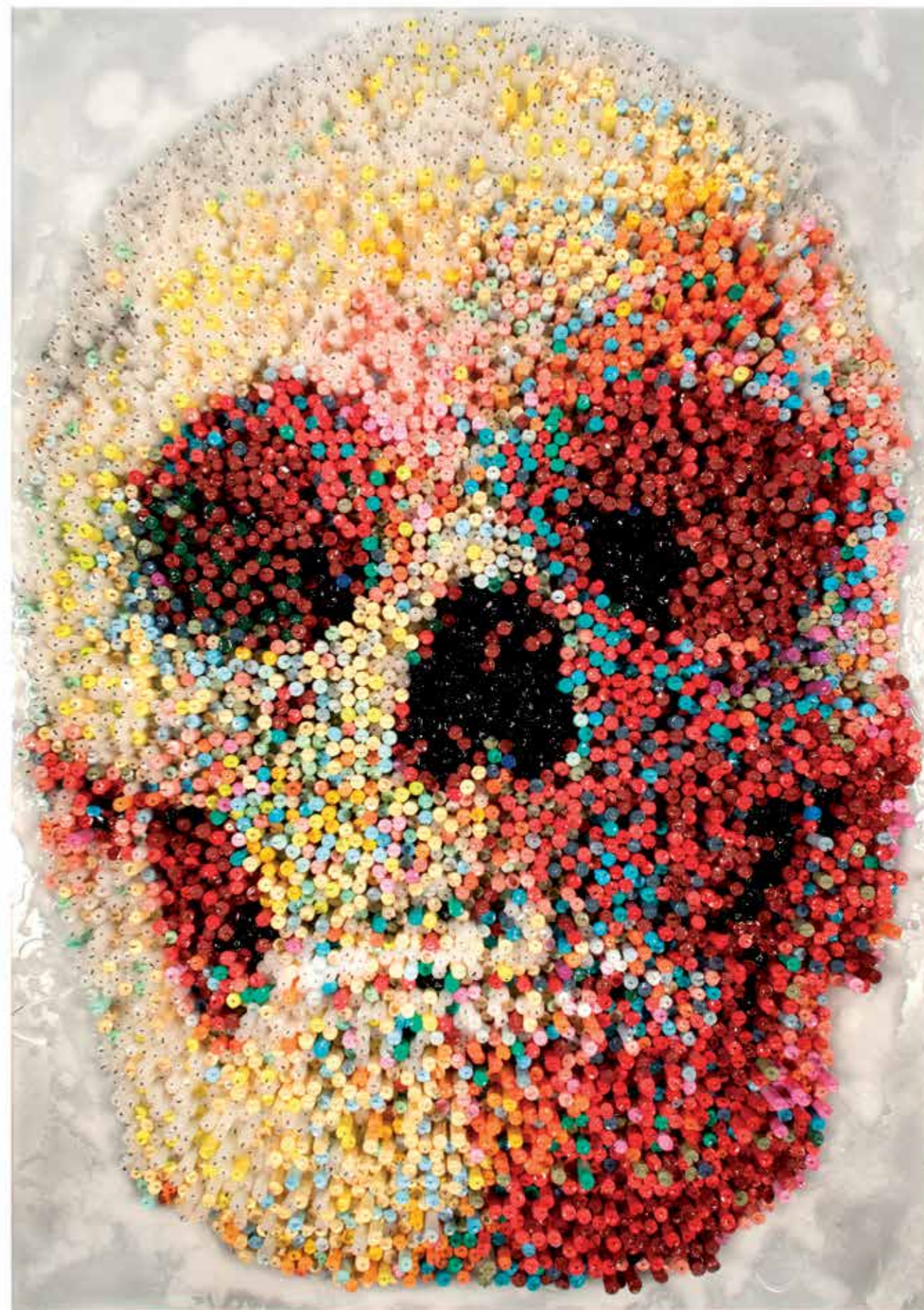
## Angels with Dirty Faces (end)

10,000 spray-painted candles on aluminium  
with resin coating  
174 x 124,5 x 16 cm - 68.5 x 49 x 6.3 in.  
2014



This work is a part of the triptych *Angels with dirty faces*.

Regeneration and renaissance are the underlying themes in these works. The symbolism within the works refers to the ephemeral and circular nature of life.



## Untitled 2 (Saving Grace)

2,000 hand-painted Diecast toy cars on aluminium  
with resin coating

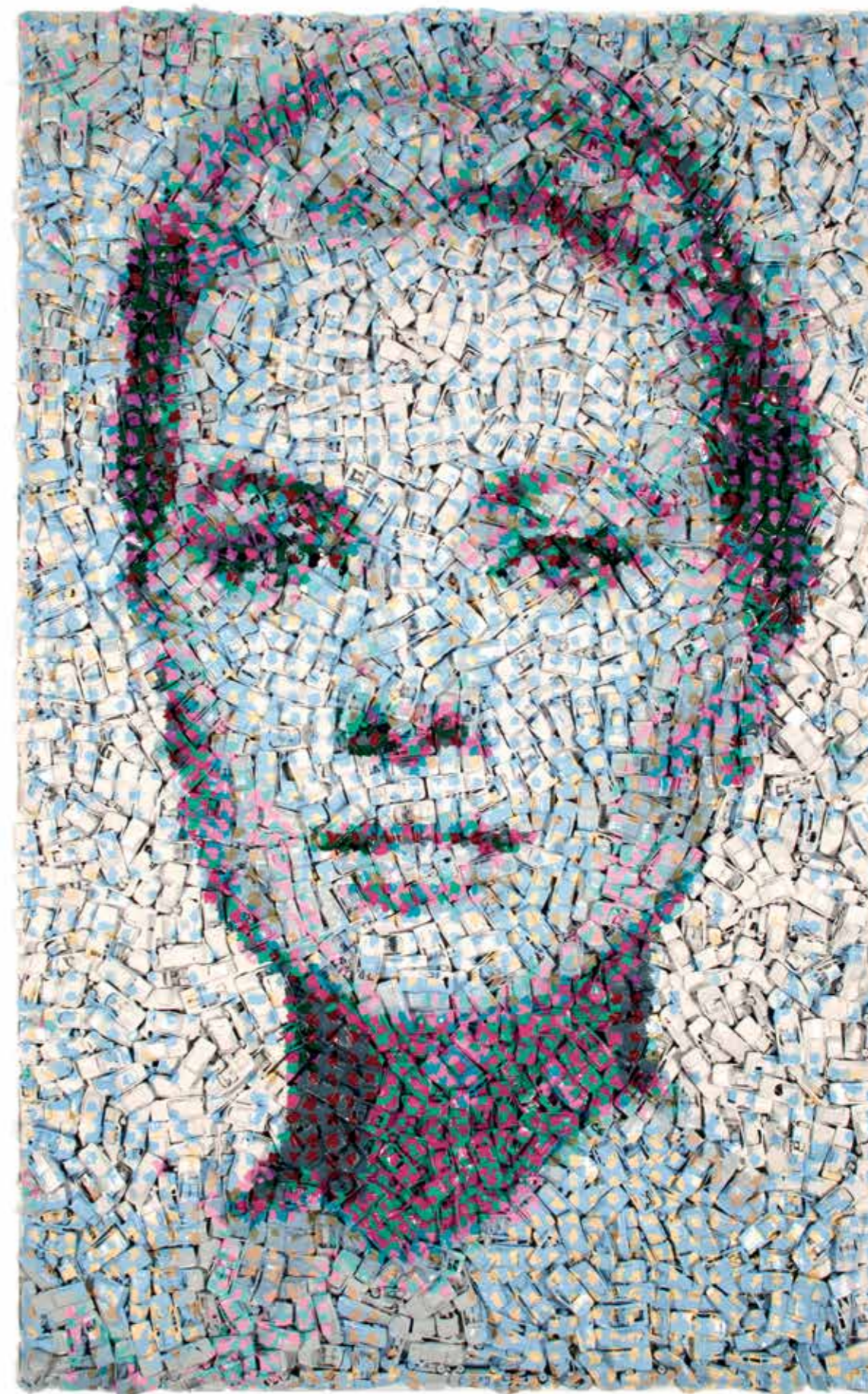
196 x 131 x 10 cm - 77.2 x 51.6 x 3.9 in.

2014



A dark memorial to the queen of Hollywood and Princess of Monaco.

This artwork is an addition to the series "Untitled" (Princess Diana) by Joe Black.

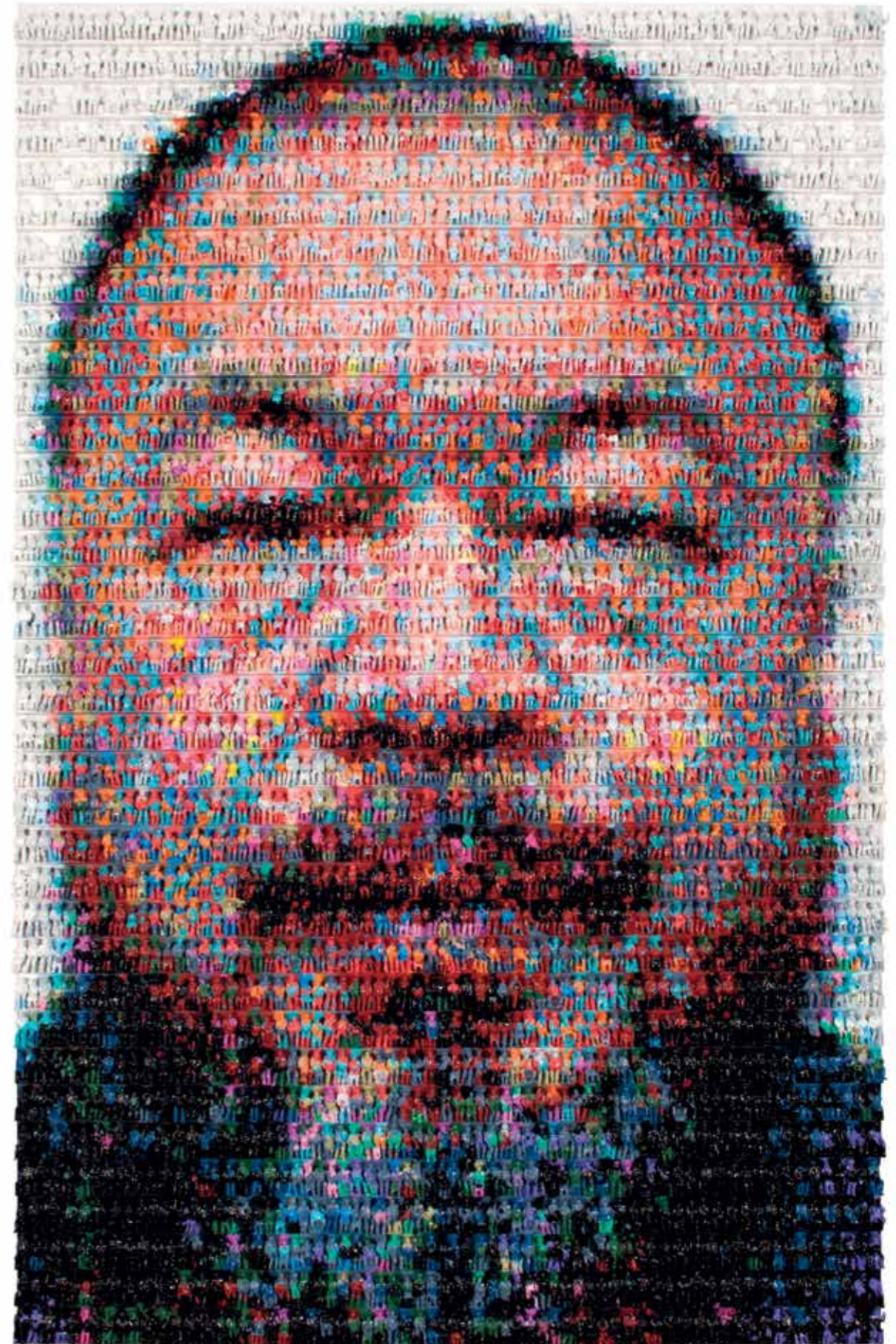


## Power to the People

2,500 hand-painted scale plastic figures  
on aluminium with clear lacquer coating  
135,5 x 91,5 x 7 cm - 53.3 x 36 x 2.8 in.  
2014

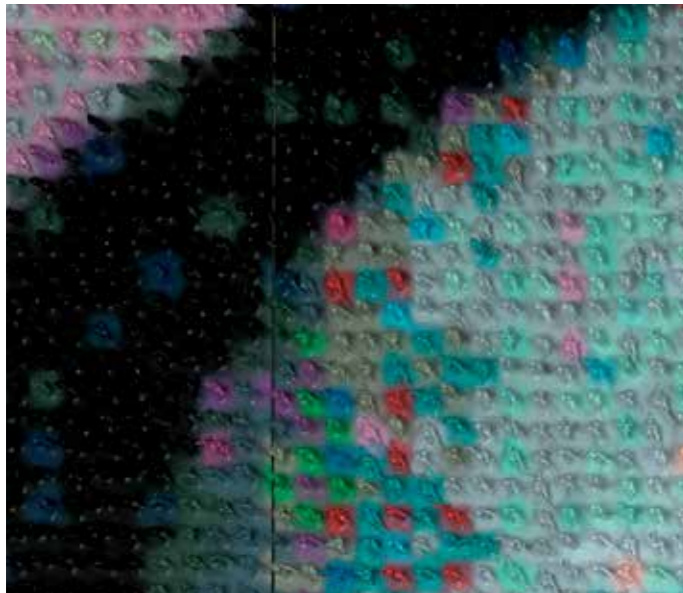


This portrait is an homage to the artist Ai Weiwei. As an artist and political activist his work combines a desire for justice, democracy and freedom of thought and action for the people of China. In the tradition of using the 'readymade', he will use historical objects from China to create a modern aesthetic loaded with meaning. Weiwei's multi-media art is always made to affect social change and uncover government corruption.



# The Great Wall of China

20,000 spray-painted soldiers on aluminium  
with resin coating  
350 x 534 cm - 137.8 x 210.2 in.  
2013



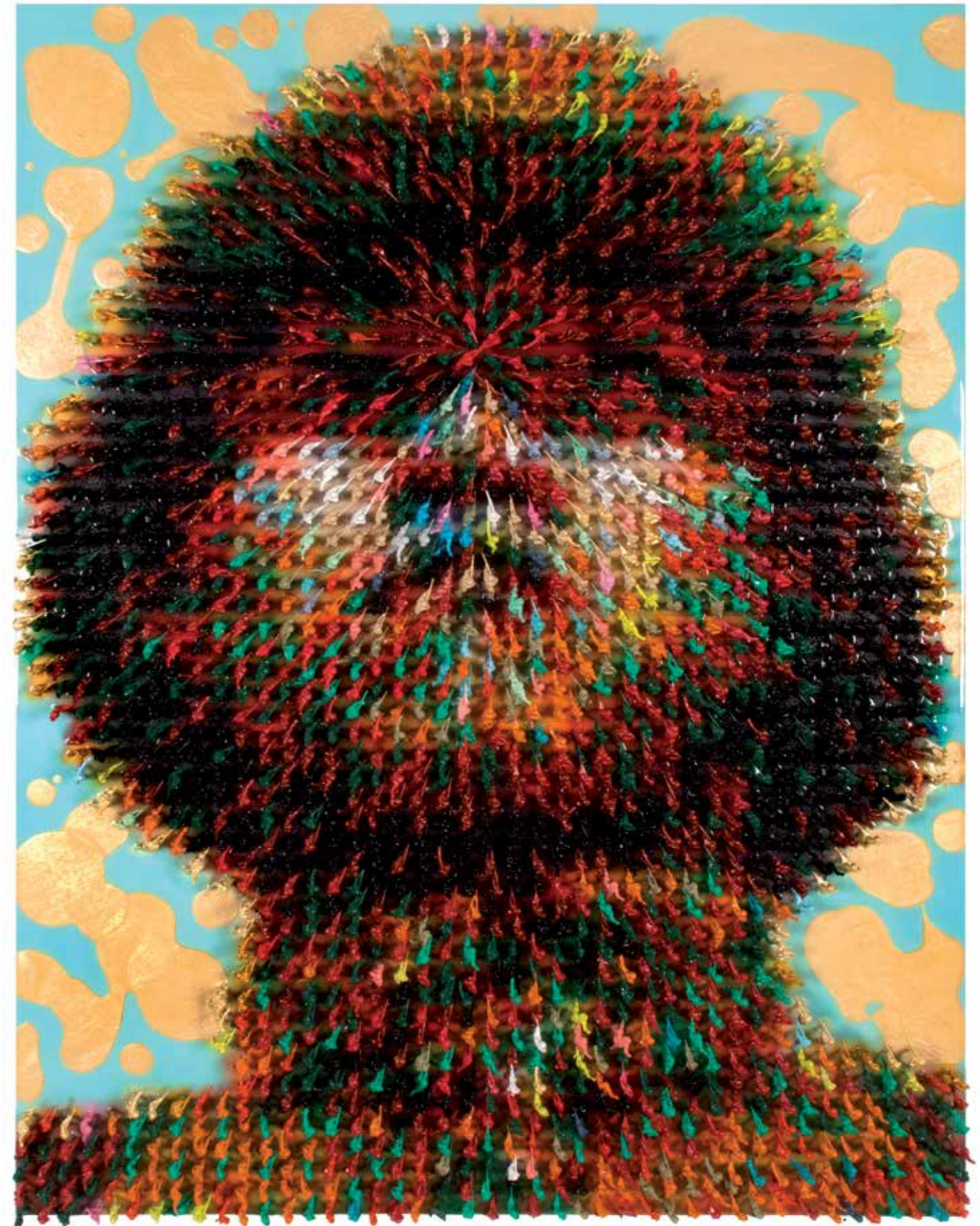
## Made in China (Capitalist)

1,000 gold and bronze spray-painted soldiers  
on aluminium with gold tint resin coating  
130 x 101 x 10 cm - 51.2 x 39.8 x 3.9 in.  
2014



*Made in China* depicts the portrait of a soldier boy as taken by legendary photographer, Robert Capa. The image was published on the front cover of *LIFE* magazine in May 1938 to cover the War of Jia-Wu.

The toy soldiers are manufactured in China.





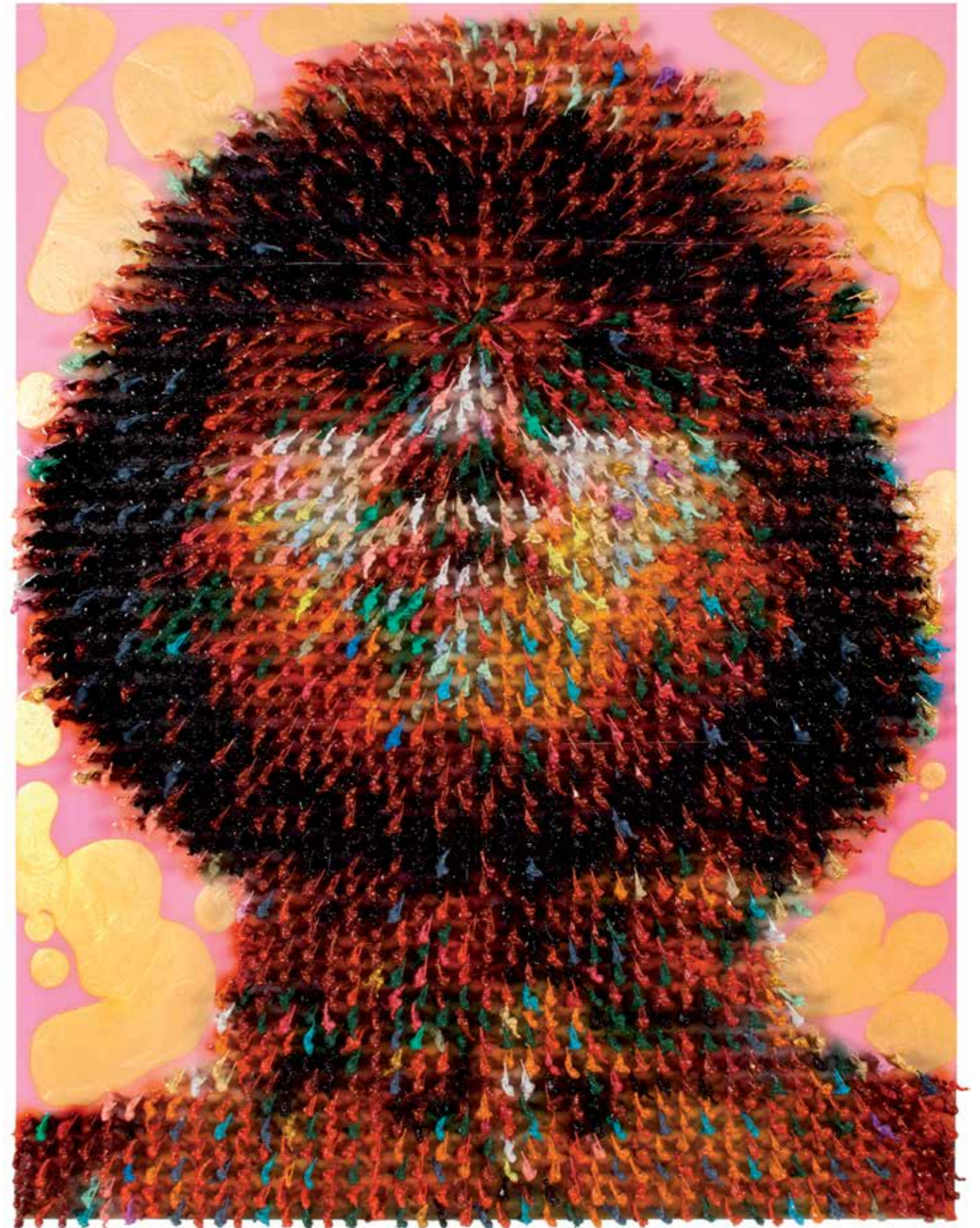
## Made in China (Communist)

1,000 gold and bronze spray-painted soldiers  
on aluminium with gold tint resin coating  
130 x 101 x 10 cm - 51.2 x 39.8 x 3.9 in.  
2014



*Made in China* depicts the portrait of a soldier boy as taken by legendary photographer, Robert Capa. The image was published on the front cover of *LIFE* magazine in May 1938 to cover the War of Jia-Wu.

The toy soldiers are manufactured in China.



# Inward / Outward

120 handmade spray-painted Airfix planes  
on aluminium with resin coating  
95,5 x 95,5 x 4,5 cm - 37.6 x 37.6 x 1.8 in.  
2013



## About Joe Black

Born in 1973, in the United Kingdom, Joe Black studied as a sculptor before moving on to illustration and working for many years as a successful commercial artist before becoming a full-time fine artist. Joe Black is now focused solely on his personal body of art. Combining his love of materials with his craft, skills, technique and a passion for perfection, each piece is painstakingly created using thousand upon thousand of ball bearings, plastic pins, toys, badges, Lego bricks or any other little object that Joe Black will come across and be inspired by. According to the artist himself, he will use pretty much anything small enough to build his large-scale imagery artworks and creating vast tonal effects. In addition to these contrasting tones, Joe Black constantly seeks to further enhance his pieces by selecting an object that will pay tribute to the iconic imagery it creates. This is perhaps best illustrated by his use of plastic toy soldiers in his depiction of Robert Capa's iconic boy soldier piece *Made in China*. Since committing himself to the world of full-time fine art, Joe Black has stormed the art world, stunning it with his powerful mix of image selection and craftsmanship. He is at the vanguard of the current Pop Art movement and in the great traditions of craftsman before him. Joe Black is rigorous in his commitment to produce excellence and he demonstrates a level of skill that often falls outside the viewers' understanding of what is possible. Since early 2012, Joe Black is exclusively represented by Opera Gallery worldwide. The same year, he was selected to feature in Opera Gallery's warehouse pop-up show 'Urban Masters' in London, as well as in the homage exhibition to Marilyn Monroe 'I want to be loved by you' that was presented in Paris. His solo show 'Ways of Seeing' in London, October 2013, was a sold out show with great praise from media and collectors alike.





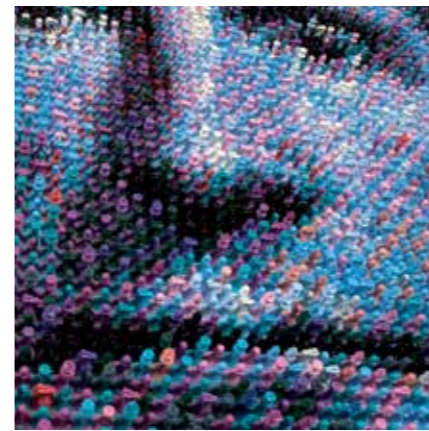
Foreword P 02



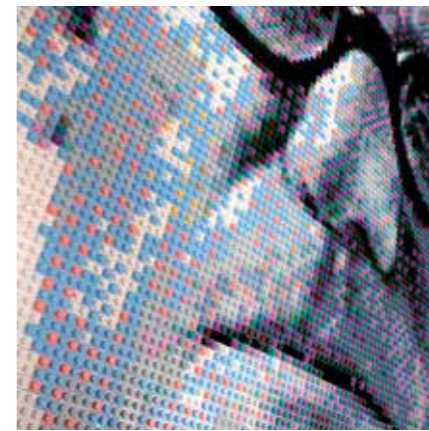
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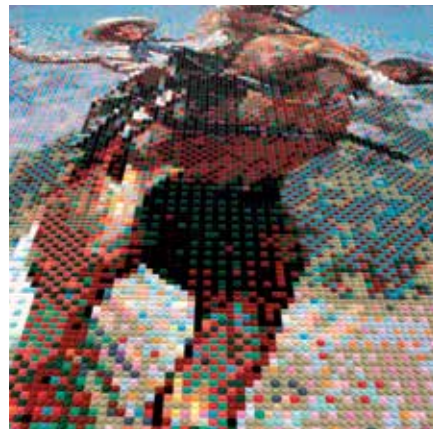
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Playing with Le Corbusier P 10



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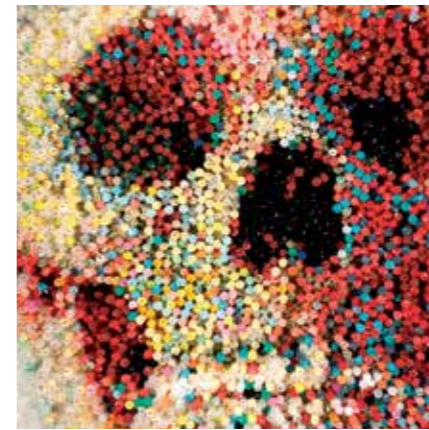
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