

Transcript of interview with Neil Lawson Baker conducted for London Live by Chris Blackhurst on 19th October 2015

Chris: Hello.

This is the Headline Interview with me, Chris Blackhurst, Business Commentator for the Evening Standard.

My guest today is Neil Lawson Baker. Neil was one of Britain's most successful dentists before he turned to art. He became a leading sculptor and then embarked on a third career organising the National Open Art Competition, Britain's biggest art contest and raising sponsorship for the arts. Neil, welcome to the Show.

Neil: Thank you.

Chris: Not one, not two, but three careers. Let's start with the first, because you weren't an ordinary dentist were you, well you were a dentist, but you had a bit of a sort of celebrity practice, is that right?

Neil: Well I read Dentistry at Guys in 1957 to 63, then I decided I liked being a student, so I stayed on and read medicine. And in those days, in order to get on in Oral Surgery which was really my specialty (I thought it was going to be my specialty) you had to have both degrees to get a decent job in a hospital, but I ended up working for a consultant at Charing Cross, Terry Blennerhassett, long since up there and he offered me his practice in Wilton Place in 1969 when it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

Chris: Right. This was at Wilton Place off, just off Knightsbridge.

Neil: Absolutely.

Chris: And you clearly got all the sort of showbiz clientele. Are you able to say something about the people whose mouths you spent gazing into.

Neil: I don't think I should mention names should I? But...

Chris: Well, I know some of them.

Neil: A lot of actors, a lot of actresses, a lot of royal families...

Chris: Including our own? Are you allowed to say that?

Neil: *(Laughs)*. Maybe. Maybe once. Yes I did.

Chris: But it was a very successful practice wasn't it?

Neil: It was successful practice.

Chris: And it wasn't just because it was celebrities and members of the royal family and things like that but you were also a bit of a pioneer; you were doing a lot of what we regard as second nature now, sort of implants and things like that.

Neil: Yeah. I did one of the first implants in Great Britain and I did a lot of crown and bridge work and we had a fantastic technician in fact he got an honour eventually, he got an MBE because of that work. The first technician to ever do that.

Chris: Because of who he did it for!

Neil: Because he just delivered on time every day and, you know he was amazing and we did many, many thousands of big reconstructions on the important people and hopefully changed peoples' lives because of it.

Chris: And, but you then... your story then took a rather dramatic twist didn't it? Tell me a bit about that.

Neil: I had a hiccup. It was quite a few years into my career. But I had a needle stick injury in 1987. I started in practice in 69 so it was quite a long time on. But I had a needle stick injury in through my glove.

Chris: And that's basically the needle sticking in?

Neil: I was injecting somebody and chatted and missed the sheath as I put the needle back in: went through my glove and you make a note of something like that if you do it because there are transmittable diseases and I actually was unfortunate enough to catch hepatitis B, so three months later which is the incubation period, I go very bright yellow and feel like death warmed up and I'm in bed for four months during which time I had a locum to look after my patients, thank God, and I was told by the doctor 'You might never go back to work because you might become a carrier'.

Chris: Oh. Of course!

Neil: Luckily I didn't become a carrier. I cleared the virus and I had in my bedroom I'd asked some of my team to bring me some equipment with which I could make sculpture and I had been given a sort of five minute lesson by a man called Caze Vercado, in Antibes some years before: Paul Gallico's son-in-law.

I'd been down celebrating a special party in Antibes when Paul Gallico died and Grace Kelly died and we had a sort of Scorpio party in Antibes and I met this sculptor and he said just get a piece of wood and some armature wire and nail it on and get some beeswax and get some wax and have a turntable and something will start happening and I did it and it did. And I did that in my bedroom during my sort of last month or so when I was getting better. And so I ended up with these waxes. I did

quite a big wax 3, 4, 5 feet high of my hand holding a bow of children which was based on a poem in Khalil Gibran's book, The Prophet, 'Speak to Us of Children'.

Someone saw it in the wax later on and said 'I think you should have that cast in bronze' and they took me down to Beaconsfield to meet a man called Eric Gibbard who was the sort of daddy of sculpture foundry in those days and he's sort of become my sculptural father or grandfather or whatever and kept on encouraging me to work.

He took me to Susse Fondeurs in Paris and got me to cast out there and he introduced me to Frink and you know he worked for Hepworth; he'd done every single piece of Hepworth.

Chris: Your sculptures are generally very large aren't they, some of them?

Neil: Some of them are large

Chris: I don't want to boost your ego any more than I have to but you have been very successful. You have been very successful, for people who don't know, you were chosen to do the sculpture for the opening of the Channel Tunnel, what else? I mean other...

Neil: Well I think it is more luck than judgement. Being in that particular position as a dental surgeon; having a very wide ranging practice we had 8,000 private patients in Belgravia it was huge and a big team which I led and people used to walk in the door and see my sculpture around the practice and say well...

Chris: They were of course were themselves very well connected people.

Neil: Well...

Chris: by the nature of the practice

Neil: Well the biggest piece I ever did was the national monument for Malaysia. And I was asked if I would meet the Prime Minister of Malaysia and his cabinet at the Savoy. Tim Bell and Charles Powell came and interviewed me to check out who I was before I saw them.

And I did a massive sort of 70 foot high 'Keris' (pronounced Chris) sword curly sword which is their national sword which they use for celebrations and weddings and things – it's angled at 45 degrees.

Chris: D'you think it's quite a thing to go from dentistry to sculpture I mean...

Neil: Well you say that but actually I think there's a very big parallel. If you think you prepare a crown preparation with a high speed drill – very accurate, very detailed –

and then you take an impression – very accurate – send it to a laboratory. They send the crown back, you fit it.

You do a sculpture, you do a model maybe this size, you might go to a specialist aggrandiseur – I used to use one in Paris called Elegant – and he would enlarge it from this size to 20 feet through his various enlargement processes and then it would be cut up and go to the foundry and the foundry make the sculpture, not you. Then it comes back and you have it installed; so it's kind of a similar process.

Chris: Yes. It involves the hands and the eyes.

Neil: It's hand-eye skill. That is the thing which is the crux of the matter.

Chris: What you have also not said, is you're quite a classic car buff aren't you, you race classic cars or you did?

Neil: Well I had involvement...

Chris: Show jumping...

Neil: I did three-day eventing.

Chris: True Renaissance man.

Neil: Laughs

Chris: So how did you get, I mean when you did your sculpture you still, you went back to dentistry?

Neil: Oh yes. Very much so

Chris: You carried on.

Neil: I did four days a week in dentistry absolutely full on

Chris: And sculpture was taking the rest of your time?

Neil: And sculpture took evenings or weekends or whatever and I'm a sort of seventeen hour a day man.

Chris: At what point did you sort of throw yourself fully into art and think that's enough dentistry.

Neil: I decided to retire from dentistry at seventy. And I think you know although I had steady hands and think I was still on top of my game, you know, you must go over the hill at some stage and I don't think people want dentists over seventy really so I decided I'd retire at seventy and handed over to some of the younger partners in the

practice and went to the country to live near Chichester and I decided that I would throw myself into the art world.

Chris: When did you take on the National Open Art cos it's a fairly big thing?

Neil: Well it was sort of kind of I went to see the exhibition of what was then known as Chichester Art, the Chichester Art Trust, Chichester Local Exhibition, and it was sort of what I call Bosham watercolours and things in those days, very nice but not sort of contemporary in any way, not cutting edge and I was asked by the man who was running it that day to talk to him about what I was interested in in the arts and he found out I was retiring so he asked me if I would go on the board and a couple of years later he asked me if I would chair it and so that's when it sort of happened about seven or eight years ago.

Chris: How big is it? Just take us through it. What is it?

Neil: It's the National Open Art (NOA that's the National Open Art) Competition.

Chris: So anyone can enter?

Neil: It produces an exhibition rather like ...

Chris: I can enter?

Neil: ... a small summer show. Anybody can enter.

Chris: So it's not like the Summer Exhibition where there's places reserved for RAs?

Neil: There's nobody reserved in ours – that's the difference, so it is truly open to the whole nation of any age of any ability. In fact this year we separated it from 15 upwards and we launched a new children's competition, with the help of the Foyle Foundation.

Chris: And it starts very soon

Neil: The Exhibition is at the Royal College of Art, later in the month starts October 21st and goes on till November 2nd. Free to enter. And an exhibition of about 100 works chosen from about 4,000 entries.

Chris: 4,000?

Neil: Yes.

Chris: At that point we have to take a short break in a few minutes I'll be asking Neil Lawson Baker about the future of the arts in Britain.

Welcome back to the Headline Interview with me Chris Blackhurst. My guest today is Neil Lawson Baker, sculptor and organiser of the National Open Art Competition. Before

the break you were saying that the exhibition is about to start, I think it's in two days' time, and it's at the Royal College of Art, is that right?

Neil: Absolutely. And it starts on October 21st.

Chris: 4,000 entries and they're now whittled down to 100.

Neil: We do judging in two stages. We use the Arts Club in Dover Street – big screen – we have different judges every year – this year we had Hughie O'Donoghue, who actually did the Summer Exhibition last year for the Royal Academy and we had a very well-known independent journalist, David Lister and Amanda Harman a photographer and Rebecca Hossack a gallerist.

Chris: But you rely on business funding don't you?

Neil: Well you... we rely on a very wide range of funding – we get a little bit from a lot of people. What you really need is a big overall sponsor and it's becoming quite what I call 'a good product' – it's been going twenty years now – but we get sponsorship from London Wall Partners which is a finance advisor in the City; we get sponsorship from Prudential; Jackson-Stops and Staff and if you look on our website you'll see there's a whole range of people who support us including lots of patrons and individuals.

Chris: But you've become quite an expert on getting money from business and you get quite hot under the collar don't you? ...

Neil: I'm an enthusiast and I think that business gains a huge amount from the arts in fact the creative arts industries across Great Britain bring in a whacking 71 billion a year – 8 million an hour

Chris: Wow!

Neil: That's the creative industries and fine art and the arts obviously is a small part of all of that but nevertheless thriving and employing a lot of people and growing annually. So we've got in London we've got all the major auctioneers Christies, Sotheby's, Phillips, Bonhams and we've got the major galleries which, you know at the top end control the market: White Cube, Gagosian and so forth and a huge amount of art input in London as a world centre for the arts.

Chris: Is it the fault of the government for not taking art seriously enough, for not putting enough money in or is it the fault of business or is it the fault of me the taxpayer that we still don't... that art is still regarded sometimes as peripheral, very elitist, quite exclusive?

Neil: Yes. I think in a way that people don't get how important it is, but if you think about it, art is involved... everything we do has art involvement, you know advertisements,

architecture, television, radio, theatre, design, fashion, music; it's all the arts and it's we're steeped in it the whole time. So if you look at it in a broader picture, I think it's actually very, very important to our economy. It employs, you know, millions of people.

Chris: And what about at schools though because all the push now is for stem subjects and it's all coding? You know, you're not at school now unless you code computers!

Neil: It's true. It's a difficult one and to get schools involved is not easy having said that when they do get involved, they get very excited about it. And we opened a children's competition this year, backed by the Foyle Foundation who do a huge amount for the Arts, and we got a lot of entries and we've got children's work being shown in the exhibition alongside the adult work. And we've got some extraordinary stories people with sort of diseases and disadvantaged children actually going back to school with great joy because they've actually submitted a work and got a little thing from us saying 'well done' and your work was chosen or your work was highly commended.

Chris: What's the top prize? What's that worth?

Neil: The top prize for the whole National Open Art is £10,000 but actually it's changed this year – we've made it £5,000 and we've got the most amazing award to go alongside it which sadly, rather like the cup at Wimbledon you don't end up owning, but Ronnie Wood, one of our patrons, one of our most important patrons, has created a fantastic sculpture for us this year which is going to be exhibited at the Royal College.

Chris: So if you win, you cannot take it home?

Neil: You have your photograph taken by it!

Chris: Isn't one of the problems with the way that the arts are going and this reliance on big business funding? I went to the opera last week and you know it was sponsored by big banks?

Neil: Yeah

Chris: Everything is. There's still this massive diversity between the opera up here and a group of actors trying to put a play on over a pub, somewhere in south London or wherever; same in paintings and sculptures that we've all heard of the Ronnie Woods and they get the money, but how do struggling artists get by?

Neil: *indistinct* for Richters and so forth, absolutely. I think it's tough. I think it's very tough and I think for a young artist to get started is very, very tough and that's where really we come in. Our sort of mission is to, you know, look after creative people and

hopefully show them and their work. We do pop-up exhibitions: we did one in Brighton; we did one in Arundel Castle; we're doing one in Harrogate very soon; Edinburgh. So we like to get the work out. And we have a big website where you can see the top 500 works and they're all for sale and I get these wonderful emails quite regularly saying 'Thanks to NOA (the National Open Art) you've changed my life' which really is why I do it.

Chris: But, cos you could be forgiven for thinking, cos of the things like you mentioned the auction rooms earlier that the prices they're commanding or rather the pictures and the works are commanding make you think the arts is in a fantastically vibrant state cos of all this money pouring in but it's only going to a handful of people isn't it?

Neil: Well it can tend to certainly look elitist but there are thousands of galleries across the country, smaller ones, OK, many of them may be struggling, but most people have art on their walls don't they in their drawing room or in their sitting room.

Chris: Not round here!

Neil: People collect art you know from £200 - £300 upwards. Things like The Affordable Art Fair, for instance, most successful and now worldwide – it's not just London. And so I think if you graft, if you good at it and if you graft and work hard and you stick at it; maybe you do it as a second job for many years but maybe you break out and get shown – we've launched a number of careers from the National Open Art and they've become very successful.

Chris: But all the time there's this pressure of cuts in Arts Funding, The Arts Council doesn't seem to get any more money and its spread thinner and thinner apart from the National Theatre and the Opera House, they seem to command vast sums, I mean what are the challenges for the arts? Do you think arts should be doing more to get its voice heard?

Neil: Certainly it's important to get its voice heard. I think that if you look around, people do realise that it actually is a very important part of the economy. I come from Chichester and we've got the most amazing theatre, one of the best in Britain; we've got Pallant House Gallery which has got the best collection of modern British art outside the Tate; we've got the Cass Foundation Sculpture Park which is one of the best in Europe and so forth and it's a little hub of culture. And there are many of those now around Great Britain, and they do bring in a lot of money into the local economy. So I think you know one underestimates what the Arts do economically.

Chris: And is everything too centred on London? The fact that London has...you mentioned Chichester but London has the biggest galleries, the showrooms I mean everything seems to focus on London competition is very intense here?

Neil: Well, London, New York, Hong Kong, Berlin you know there are major art centres all round the world and these top top galleries all have their galleries there so there is a slight elitist touch to it, feel to it at the very top but I think you know the whole creativity business actually is more important than just the actual, the painting or the drawing or the sculpture.

Chris: Your exhibition, the winner (presumably you know who it is but can't say) but the winner will be an unknown, somebody who's unknown, I certainly won't have heard of?

Neil: I think that's right.

Chris: And this will be the making of them and presumably it's a fantastic work as well?

Neil: Well it's a foot on the rung isn't it? I think you can't... Rome wasn't made in a day and you start, but to have on your CV that you won the National Open Art competition is certainly important, and we have a lot of categories. We don't just have Fine Art, we have contemporary paintings; we have photography, we have drawing; we have wall hung installations; we have print; we have moving image from this year onwards and the children's competition, so there's quite a lot of categories.

Chris: So let's just finish by saying again where it is so it's at the Royal College of Art; it starts in two days' time. Do you need tickets? Can you just turn up?

Neil: No. It's free to enter.

Chris: You can literally walk in off the street.

Neil: And we're having...

Chris: And what hours? Nine till five or...?

Neil: No. 10 to 5:30 and Sundays it's 11 – 4:00. On the final Sunday, we're giving out free Bloody Marys...

Chris: Free Bloody Marys

Neil: *laughs*

Chris: Are there limits on how many you can have?

Neil: From 11 till 2:00

Chris: Are you serious?

Neil: Yes.

Chris: How many can you have?

Neil: Well...

Chris: I'll be going round and round!

Neil: We just thought that would be a nice touch. We call it the Hangover, cos the 'Hang' is 'Over'!

Chris: Of course! Brilliant! Neil, thank you so much. Unfortunately that's all we have time for on the Headline Interview today. Thank you for watching.